

Brill's Companion to Leo Strauss' Writings on Classical Political Thought

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Brill's Companion to Leo Strauss' Writings on Classical Political Thought

Edited by

Timothy W. Burns



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Leo Strauss' Recovery of Classical Political Philosophy

Timothy W. Burns

Attempting to learn something of importance *from* ancient thinkers, Leo Strauss argued, and not merely *about* them, “places an obligation on the interpreter to pay the most careful attention not to interject into [a thinker’s] teaching opinions that prevail or threaten to prevail today.”¹ In part because Strauss’ own writings on the ancients meet this obligation, they are both enormously helpful to anyone wishing to engage with the unmediated thought of the ancients, and very challenging, especially to readers used to writings that conform—consciously or unconsciously—to contemporary opinion. His careful explications of works by classical thinkers, especially of Socratic political philosophy but also of pre-Socratic philosophers and of poets tragic and comic, make considerable demands on the mind and heart of any reader. His later writings in particular are written in a dense style that sometimes has the appearance of offering no more than summaries of the argument of classical texts. It is the aim of this volume to assist a new generation of readers in their introduction to these writings on the works of classical authors, and to provide essays that may also be useful to those who have already learned from Strauss’ writings on classical authors.

Strauss’ writings are almost always commentaries. Just as “Plato points as it were away from himself to Socrates,”² so does Strauss in his commentaries point away from himself to the authors whose thought he is attempting to elucidate. It may nonetheless be of some help to the readers of this volume to become acquainted or reacquainted with the contemporary concerns that led Strauss to open a path back to the study of the ancients. I will begin with a brief overview of some of the key themes of his life’s work, and then turn to a fuller account of Strauss’ turn to classical political philosophy over and against the historicism that had emerged out of modern rationalism and that had denied the possibility of such a return. I will conclude with a brief examination of his exchange with the Hegelian Alexandre Kojève, through which he attempted to introduce his recovery of classical political thought to a wide audience.

¹ Strauss (1935), 123.

² Strauss (1967), 399–400.

1 Overview: Some Key Themes of Strauss' Thought³

Strauss followed Goethe in seeing “the struggle between belief and unbelief,” or the question of the source of the obligations by which we guide our lives, as “the deepest theme of all world and human history.”⁴ As a morally serious young man he was gripped by the apparently irreconcilable conflict between nobility-inducing faith, on one hand, and the claims of science, on the other. In a manner helpful to others, he presented (in his 1965 Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*) the arguments by which he wrested himself free from modern presuppositions and the remnants of the biblical and classical tradition that had been transformed by those presuppositions, so that the issue of faith versus reason could present itself in full clarity.

Strauss stressed that his writings were appearing at a time when the possibility of philosophy, understood as reason's search for enduring truth, so far from being taken for granted, had been radically called into question by the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Heidegger. Partly as a result of that questioning, and partly through the development of positivism, the West had come to be characterized by a protracted collapse of confidence in the possibility of discovering, through reason, a genuine understanding of the world by which we can and should take our bearings. Through his life's work as a teacher and a scholar, Strauss faced and led others to face that situation squarely, and guided the way both to a recovery of the original ground for the rational life in Socratic political philosophy and to a respectful, painstakingly careful account of the developments in modern political philosophy that began as an alternative to classical political philosophy but ended up with a farewell to reason.

After his early work on Spinoza, Strauss was led, through a study of Moses Maimonides and his predecessors among the Islamic *falasifa*, to the works of Plato. He came to realize that a crisis of reason similar to the one we are witnessing in our time had occurred at the time of Socrates, who became aware that permanent limits to what is genuinely knowable by science or philosophy, especially concerning the first or fundamental sources of things, opened up a remarkable possibility: that the world, far from having the kind of intelligible necessities that reason seeks to uncover in its search for first causes, could instead—as adherents of divine revelation had always claimed—be the work of mysterious, creative gods or god, whose powers would render reason's search for causes futile and possibly fatal. Socrates' grasp of this problem, Strauss realized, is what led to his “second sailing,” that is, to an unprecedented

3 This section is taken, with minor changes, from Burns (2013).

4 Strauss (1935), 23.

attempt to ground the life of reason not (as the pre-Socratics had attempted) through science itself but instead by means of a preliminary investigation of political-moral questions. It led him, that is, to found *political philosophy*, as a necessary "preliminary" to philosophy proper—the priority of which to political philosophy was never abandoned by Socratics.

Strauss carefully and prudently explained how pre-modern, Socratic political philosophy, that is, the dialectical investigation of justice and of law that one finds in the Platonic dialogues and in the works of later thinkers who read them carefully, provides a sufficient answer to the question of how one can know that the life led according to reason is the right life for a human being. By his attention to this central question, Strauss helped his readers to undertake the study of political philosophy neither as an antiquarian venture nor with a politicized spirit, but instead as an activity vital to their own lives and the lives of those with whom they live. At the same time he neither allowed his readers to overlook the peculiar difficulties attending the recovery of reason in our age, nor obscured the profoundly agonizing self-transformation that is required of students of Socratic philosophy in any age. And these in turn made him keenly aware of the measures taken by political philosophers to write with a view to the various needs and capacities of their many readers, or with what he called "esoteric writing."

In presenting a dialectical examination of the problem of justice as the Socratic answer to the problem that revelation poses to science or philosophy, Strauss emphasized that such dialectic, far from being itself philosophical or scientific, proceeds on the basis of premises agreed to by the (potential) believer; it proceeds from the given, "pre-scientific" world of "common-sense," that is, on the basis of premises shared by the non-philosophic. The examination discloses that humans are animated by a deep and passionate "erotic" longing for completion or perfection, a longing for a self-transcending union with the eternal or divine over and against awareness of their own mortality, a longing that may be hidden, repressed, or diverted into worldly addictions like monetary acquisition, but is at work everywhere in political action. But this longing proves to call forth purification by thought, since humans also desire escape from delusion. In the best cases, Socratic dialectic purges this longing. The conversions of a few hitherto erotic potential statesmen to the philosophic life give decisive evidence that the philosopher's own liberation is not idiosyncratic. Dialectic therefore provides the ground of philosophy or science simply, and was understood to be adequate by later thinkers like Maimonides, al-Farabi, and Marsilius of Padua. But the dialectical purging proves to be healthy for but a few strong souls, and this is the deepest cause of esoteric writing, the "benevolent deception" practiced by Socratics, who grasp the sources

of the most firmly rooted moral prejudices that pervade every time and who accommodate their writing to them. The practice of Socratic political philosophy does not, then, according to Strauss, entail *any* promise of a rational politics or morality; it instead includes only a kind of writing that makes contributions to the edification of the reigning civic virtues, while simultaneously leading a few morally serious readers toward the philosophic life.

Equipped with this recovery of the intention and mode of writing of classical political philosophy, and having undergone the “change of orientation” that it entailed, Strauss returned to his study of the origins of modern political philosophy in the work of Hobbes, re-opening the “quarrel of the ancients and the moderns,” which had been temporarily closed by the apparent victory of the moderns. His intention in returning to Hobbes was two fold: to understand modern thought radically, and to clear away later developments that had hidden the fundamental questions. Strauss argued that Hobbes, unlike his successors, addressed squarely the question of the right way of life, but that even Hobbes did so while “taking for granted” the tradition, and hence the possibility and necessity, of political philosophy, or that he did so with a “neglect” of the purport of classical political philosophy. Hobbes misunderstood that intention to be the attempt to establish the right social order. He and his successors, Strauss argued, were thereby led to put the establishment of that order into the service of the grounding of science. For Hobbes, Strauss claimed, was guided in his thought by an effort to overcome “the cavils of the skeptics,”—challenges posed by those who, like John Calvin or the Muslim *mutakallimûn*, frankly claimed that the world is fundamentally unintelligible because it is at every moment the work of a mysterious, creative God. With Descartes, Hobbes *granted* that unintelligibility, and proposed against it a phenomenological-positivist science (positing laws constructed by the human mind, and re-making the world on their basis). Hobbes’s new activist or “effective” *political* science was to be the means to make this science secure, by a disenchantment of the world through a complete “re-orientation” of humanity, away from faith in god or gods and toward “civilization.” Strauss noted that the project of Hobbes and his successors rejected any serious engagement with what is disclosed in speech about the good and bad, just and unjust, and reconceived political phenomena on the basis of the imposition of an abstract theory, turning away from the speech of statesmen as something infected with imaginative superstition or fanaticism and as obstructing the achievement of this-worldly pleasures.

To achieve their end, the moderns laid out new theoretical principles of social life: “power,” rather than the good as the end of striving; natural rights, or selfish but justified claims, rather than natural or divine obligations; a state

of nature rather than a perfect beginning; natural laws as merely human rules showing the best means to peace and comfortable living; a social contract of individuals to secure their rights. The aim of the liberal regimes founded on these new principles was, Strauss argued, to de-politicize human life, an aim that required a rejection of the Socratic claim that humans have an erotic longing for eternity. That longing was seen by the moderns as merely a distorted form of desire for the goods of this world, with which—thanks to the conquest of nature by the new natural science—humans could be made content. The new, liberal regimes were designed to provide an enlightenment and a liberation from ignorance, superstition, and prejudice, both through the scientific conquest of nature and through the acceptance of the new, “rational” understanding of justice (natural rights) rather than the categorical duties to which an allegedly divine law summons them. The disenchantment of the world through the success of the new political science was, then, a key part of attaining the desired end: a world in which science had at last grounded itself, that is, met the challenge posed to it by divine revelation.

Having come to understand early modern political philosophy as aiming to answer in this manner the challenge of revelation to philosophy, Strauss came to see the West's eventual loss of faith in reason as having been an incipient problem from the very beginning of modernity, with each successive attempt to correct for it, or “wave,” deepening the crisis.

2 The Return to the Ancients: Xenophon⁵

The turn to the ancients began with what Strauss called the “reorientation” that his thought underwent in the early 1930s, when he moved from seeing a return to classical political philosophy as impossible to seeing it as both possible and necessary for the grounding of the rational life.⁶ Letters from the late 1930s written to Jacob Klein, who had provided Strauss with initial help in the rediscovery of esotericism, express Strauss' thrill in rediscovering esotericism in the works of many, but he twice singles out Xenophon as his favorite practitioner of this ancient art of writing. “Xenophon is my special favorite,” he tells Klein in 1939, “because he had the courage to disguise himself as a fool and so to go through the millennia—he is the biggest rascal that I know—I believe he does

⁵ The following sections are taken, in modified form, from Burns (2016).

⁶ For the best introduction to that reorientation of Strauss' thinking, see Ruderman and Yaffe (2014).

in his writings exactly what Socrates did in his life.”⁷ Some months later Strauss added, “About Xenophon, I did not exaggerate, by Hera: he is quite a great man, not inferior to Thucydides and Herodotus himself. The so-called failures of his stories are exclusively the consequences of his supreme contempt for the ridiculous *erga* of the *kaloikagathoi*. . . . In short, he is quite marvelous and from now on my uncontested favorite.”⁸ It is not surprising, then, that with the exception of an important chapter on Plato and Hobbes in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*,⁹ Strauss’ published writings on the ancients begin with studies of Xenophon, first of the *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*¹⁰ and then *On Tyranny*, written in 1944–45, which he called in a letter to Julius Guttman a “preliminary study,” explaining that “at some point I should like to finish the interpretation of Xenophon’s four Socratic writings,”¹¹ a statement that echoes the concluding paragraph of *On Tyranny*, and a promise that he fulfilled. It is likewise not surprising, in light of Strauss’ stated reasons for his preference for Xenophon, that Strauss himself practiced a similar pretense, posing as a mere “scholar” while attributing to others the more exalted labels of “philosopher” or “great thinker.”¹²

While these epistolary statements are thus both revealing of some important insights that Strauss was drawing from Xenophon’s writings and suggestive of his own manner of writing, they don’t tell us why Strauss had turned to the ancients to begin with, nor why, once he had completed *On Tyranny*—his study of Xenophon’s *Hiero*—he actively sought to engage the Hegelian Alexandre Kojève in a debate on his findings.¹³ For this we need to grasp both

7 Letter to Klein, February 16, 1939, in Meier (2001), 537–38. The English translation is from Patard 2014, 28. Since Patard’s work is unpublished I have provided in all cases of references to Strauss’ texts translated in it the Box, Folder, and page numbers of the original documents as they appear in the Leo Strauss Papers (Special Collections Research Center of the University of Chicago Library).

8 Letter to Klein, July 25, 1939, in Meier (2001), 574. Translation in Patard (2014), 29. See also the Letter to Klein of August 18, 1939 in Meier (2001), 579–80.

9 That is, the concluding chapter. See the excellent article of Stauffer (2007).

10 Strauss (1939). Strauss taught a course on the *Oeconomicus* at the New School in Fall 1940, and completed an essay on it by August 1942. See Patard (2014), “Introduction,” 30–1, and “The Origins of Economic Science: An Interpretation of Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*,” Leo Strauss Papers, Box 6, Folder 11. Patard (2014), 151–88.

11 Letter from Strauss to Julius Guttman dated May 20, 1949 (Leo Strauss Papers, Box 4, Folder 8), cited in Meier (2006), 24 n 32.

12 See, for example, Strauss (1956), 305.

13 *On Tyranny* was published in its original French version in 1948, and in a letter dated August 22, 1948, Strauss asked Kojève to review this work “in France,” stating that he

what Hegeliansim represented and offered to thoughtful readers, and the reasons for Strauss' return to the alternative, classical understanding.

3 Modernity, Hegel's Historical Philosophy, and Historicism

Historicism was and remains the reigning orthodoxy forbidding such a return. What Strauss means by historicism is the belief or sense that history is a "dimension of reality"¹⁴ (one that had allegedly "escaped classical thought") that makes it impossible for anyone to ascend out of his time and place to grasp anything timeless. Strauss indicates in a number of places that while positivism—the form that science had finally come in the 19th century to assume—finds classical thought "obsolete" because "value-laden," historicism, or what he also calls "radical historicism" or "existentialism," represents a far more serious and formidable challenge to the return to the ancients.¹⁵ After a long intellectual struggle, assisted by medieval and then ancient political philosophy, Strauss eventually arrived at an understanding of modern philosophy and its trajectory that called into question the fundamental Heideggerian notion of the historicity of human existence. He argued that the alleged historical consciousness had been not discovered but invented, that historicity is a problematic interpretation of certain phenomena that admit of another interpretation, or (more forcefully) that historicism is a "pseudo-philosophy" dominating contemporary thought and standing against genuine philosophizing. He understood historicism as not a genuine or sound position but instead the result of taking for granted a development out of modern philosophy which, if fully understood, proved to be fundamentally accidental and unnecessary, if at the same time a very powerful obstacle blocking access to a recovery of the ancients and hiding the radical character of their thought. Strauss' exposition of the development of historicism was made possible by his recovery of classical political philosophy and it helps to illuminate in turn his understanding of classical political philosophy and the urgency of its recovery. If we are to understand what was at issue in that recovery, we must first try to grasp Strauss' understanding of the emergence of historicism out of modern thought, and the alternative that Hegel, on one hand, and the ancients, on the other, represent to historicism.

"knows of no one besides you and [Jacob] Klein who will understand what I am after." Strauss (1991), 236. All page references appearing in parentheses are to this edition.

14 Strauss 1953, 33; Strauss 1968, 33.

15 See for example Strauss (1953), 25–34; Strauss (1956); Strauss (1959b), 26–7; Strauss (1959c), 26.

Far from offering an aspect of reality hidden from previous thought or experience, as its proponents claimed, historicism proved upon inspection according to Strauss to be merely the result of a failed “corrective” of modern philosophy. But to what, then, was it an attempted corrective? Why did modernity need a corrective? We recall that modern philosophy, as Strauss understood it, had at its theoretical core an attempt to solve the challenge posed to science by the possibility of a *Deus deceptor*, a god who made the world appear to be governed by certain necessities but who did so only to deceive us. This modern attempt, which starts with the Cartesian-Hobbesian retreat into consciousness, includes the remaking, by technological science, of the world of sense perception in accordance with the laws that we prescribe to nature. As Strauss saw it, philosophy makes this retreat to an “artificial island,”¹⁶ and becomes politically active, both in order to overcome the threat posed to it by the Biblical God, and to offer human beings the providential care erroneously hoped for from that God. It seeks “progressive” change, enlightenment of all human consciousness by means of political and technological movement toward a fully transformed, secular society that can satisfy human needs, so that, in Strauss’ phrase, with the given world replaced by the world created by modern philosophy and science, orthodox faith, “more than refuted, would be “outlived,” held to be the product of a primitive, backward consciousness.¹⁷

This Enlightenment project came under attack by Rousseau, and the movements he spawned, especially in Germany: romanticism, with its efforts to recover the lost past derided by progressive modernity, and the “Historical School” of jurisprudence that came into being out of romanticism. But what is the problem that Strauss saw as the basis of Rousseau’s devastating critique of his modern predecessors? The moderns had sought to ground the rational life by means of a transformation of society toward a wholly secular, rational one. Rousseau revived the Socratic recognition that the requirements of society are at odds with the debunking of the sacred, especially the debunking of sacred origins; he saw a *religious* account of human life and of the whole in which it was lived as required for the transformation of natural, selfish man into a citizen, or for the subordination of the individual will to the general will. Forgetting or ignoring Rousseau’s other arguments—concerning the solitary walker and the primacy of the theoretical life of the free individual—Rousseau’s romantic and politically-minded followers took up instead his communitarianism, his doctrine of the general will, and his claims concerning the

16 See Strauss (1953), 172–74.

17 Strauss (1936), 13.

"primacy of conscience or of sentiment and tradition." Their political/moral concerns drove their selection of Rousseau's teaching, and drove them away from modern rationalism.¹⁸

Hegel attempted to save rationalism from this romantic reaction, incorporating the particulars of human history and various traditions, which had been highlighted by the romantics, into the definitive philosophic story of the progressive acquisition of human rational self-consciousness. In Hegel's work are found the four assumptions that Strauss identified as transforming philosophy into the history of philosophy. The first is that (A) "the substance, or the principle of being, or the root of all truth and meaning, is the human mind as the mind of mankind." This of course is already suggested in Kant's "system of categories," but Hegel makes substance, which was for Kant the unknowable, neumenal realm, the mind itself, the subject, man. Moreover, for Hegel, (B) "what the human mind is, can become known only from what it does or produces" and (C) "the doings or productions of a human mind form an orderly or intelligible sequence whose stages coincide with the periods of general history." While history had already gained in importance for progressive, modern philosophy as demonstrative of modern progress away from a benighted past consciousness, it became crucial for Hegel, as the account of the cumulative unfolding of human consciousness. Finally, (D) "the stages of the productive activity of the human mind find their clearest expression in the philosophic efforts belonging to these stages," so that the stages come to seem best represented not in the art or politics of each age, but in its philosophic thought.¹⁹ With these four assumptions, Hegel originated the view that philosophy is identical with the history of philosophy, and that the historical process having been completed, philosophy is at an end. The object of philosophical inquiry has in his thought become not the whole but the human mind, combined with an account of its history—of the scientific, rationally directed mind emergent from a dark, backward past through the exteriorization of its ideas. Modern philosophy as progressive philosophy came in this way to have in Hegel's completion of it an historical component that classical and medieval philosophy never did. It became completed human practice, meaningful action.²⁰

18 Strauss (1947), 482.

19 Strauss, "History of Philosophy: Its Nature and Its Function. Lecture to be delivered on November 12, 1947—General Seminar." 13 sheets, written on both sides with a pen. Leo Strauss Papers, Box 6, Folder 14, quotations from the page that is the first version of the beginning of the lecture, verso. Patard (2014), 273–307, at 275.

20 "There came into being a new type of theory, of metaphysics, having as its highest theme human action and its product rather than the whole, which is in no way the object of

This means of course that for Strauss Hegel is not an historicist. Hegel saw his own historical philosophy as relative to his time, but he saw that time as absolute time, his philosophy as the final philosophy. He avoided in this way the self-contradiction of claiming that all thought was strictly relative to its time and that this thought transcended time; his was the completion of all previous philosophy—what previous philosophy, in its time-bound attempts, had been moving toward.

Yet if Hegel was right, this also meant that anyone who desired a meaningful, moral life, a life “which has a *significant* and undetermined future” (*NRH*, 320, emphasis added), had to reject what was now called “theory” or philosophy in the name of “life.” For the abiding moral considerations and devotions that had given birth to romanticism and to the Historical School were not by any means satisfied with Hegel’s claim that significant or morally meaningful human life had been exhausted in past deeds, in the historical secularization of the Christian notion of the dignity of each individual. Moreover, while all Hegelians accepted that philosophy as it had been practiced (that is, as “interpretation” of the world) was indeed finished, the radical Hegelians called for a whole new way of being. As Marx famously put it, “philosophers have only *interpreted* the world; the point, however, is to *change* it.” Thus was born on one hand Marxism and on the other “existentialist” philosophy (*NRH*, 320–21), the latter being at the heart of what Strauss means by saying that “Historicism came into being owing to the disintegration of Hegel’s philosophy.”²¹ (The radical Hegelians included not only Marx and Engels but also Kierkegaard, the late or mystical Shelling, William James, and Nietzsche.)

The reaction against Hegel thus had two results. First, it strengthened the existing Historical School, especially of jurisprudence, and so the historical consciousness that had grown out of romanticism (and against which Hegel had made the case for a final, universal, rational consciousness). The 19th century figures of importance in the first result whom Strauss has in mind (but rarely names) are the historian Leopold von Ranke and the jurists Friedrich Carl

human action. Within the whole and the metaphysic that is oriented upon it, human action occupies a high but subordinated place. When metaphysics came, as it now did, to regard human action and its product as the end toward which all other beings or processes are directed, metaphysics became philosophy of history. Philosophy of history was primarily theory, i.e., contemplation, of human practice and therewith necessarily of completed human practice; it presupposed that significant human action, History, was completed. By becoming the highest theme of philosophy, practice ceased to be practice proper, i.e., concern with *agenda*.” Strauss (1953), 320.

21 “Research in the History of Ideas,” Summer Course 1942. 23 numbered pages, written with a pen (Leo Strauss Papers, Box 6, Folder 14), 15. Patard (2014), 233–71, at 250.

von Savigny, Otto von Gierke, and (in England) Henry Sumner Maine.²² This Historical School of jurisprudence stood in opposition to appeals to modern rationalist natural law doctrine (*Vernunftsrecht*) which, since the Napoleonic victories, were being made all over modern, enlightened Europe. The historical school understood law not (as the largely English Enlightenment had) as an attempt to state in statute the rights man has by nature, nor (as did Hegel) an expression of fully rational self-consciousness, nor (as historicists later did) as the product of an unsupported "decision," but as the expression of a *Volksgeist*, the product of a growth out of the particular needs and convictions of a people into an organic, sacred whole worthy of obedience or reverence. It sought to wipe out revolutionary appeals to modern natural rights and natural law while presenting existing law as worthy of the highest reverence. Strauss saw a deep kinship between this German Historical School and the writings of Edmund Burke, whose term for desirable homebred laws, "prescriptive"—that is, written long before, time out of mind—was the early equivalent of the subsequent German term "Historical."²³

Second, the Historical School failed in its effort to establish principles of moral action that could claim to be both transcendent and particular. It was open to the charge that its proponents sanctioned laws that could not reasonably claim to be the results of a people's genuine needs and insights, since they could instead easily appear to be merely the result of conventions or beliefs. The Historical School thus gave way to historicism proper, according to which our consciousness is not only shaped but inescapably determined by our historical situation, and our moral direction is frankly the result not of needs but of our "decision" to embrace our here and now. Historicism would indeed limit each and every human to his time, depriving any truth claim of its validity for more than its time. Yet historicism, precisely by quietly or surreptitiously claiming that this insight into our historicity is the permanently decisive insight, is inconsistent just where Hegel was consistent; it both wishes and does not wish

22 On von Ranke, see "Historicism." "Lecture to be delivered in the fall of 1941 in the General Seminar [of The New School for Social Research]." Typescript. No Box or Folder number supplied, Patard (2014), 206–31, at 213. On Savigny and Henry Sumner Maine, see Strauss' letter to Löwith, August 18, 1946, and "Natural Right." "Lecture to be delivered on January 9, 1946 in the General Seminar and in February 1946 in Annapolis." Typed manuscript, 20 pages, with footnotes written in the margin in pencil. Leo Strauss Papers, Box 6, Folder 15, p. 5. Patard (2014), 385–420, at 388–90. On Gierke, see the letter to Klein, January 8, 1935, and the "Natural Right" lecture, pp. 6 and 15. Patard (2014), 389 and 396.

23 For a discussion of the Historical School and its preparation by Burke's doctrine of "prescription," see Strauss' Autumn, 1963 University of Chicago course on Vico, 10–12 of the original typed transcript. See also the second part of Chapter 6 of Strauss (1953).

to say that there is no absolute moment.²⁴ For as Strauss points out, according to historicists themselves the insight into the historical contingency of all Being is the decisive insight, since they grant that loss of this insight would bring with it a new dark age.²⁵ Thus what had emerged owing to a sense of loss or moral shortcomings of modern thought and of the need to recover what had been lost, turned, without a questioning of its own unique development, especially of its reaction to specifically modern rationalism, into an anti-theoretical, anti-philosophic movement. "The revolts against Hegelianism on the part of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, in so far as they now exercise a strong influence on public opinion, thus appear as attempts to recover the possibility of practice, i.e., of human life which has a significant and undetermined future. But these attempts increased the confusion, since they destroyed, as far as in them lay, the very possibility of theory" (*NRH*, 320–21).

In sum, the early moderns attempted to eliminate the great obstacle posed to philosophizing by the Biblical God with a new kind of natural science, a constructivist science, by transforming human consciousness, through a humanly providential transformation of the world. That attempt held human fear of a nature that was indifferent to human suffering to be conquerable by dint of awareness of scientific progress in the conquest of that nature. The Historical School arose as a first cousin of romanticism, as a makeshift political-jurisprudential-theological effort to correct this attempt, to provide a morally satisfying human life by grounding moral meaning in a "sacred" process of a nation's history and the laws it had produced. When this attempt, too, proved to be a failure, the alleged historical dimension of human life trumpeted by the Historical School was not abandoned, but was simply accepted as a "discovery." Heidegger's "radical historicism" seeks to provide the philosophic, ontological ground of this historical consciousness, to demonstrate that the experience of historical contingency is a genuine experience corresponding to the manner in which Being discloses itself.

Strauss' studies of classical political philosophy led him to doubt this experience. They led him to see the reaction that set in against Hegel, in the name of

24 See Strauss (1953), 28–9.

25 According to its proponents, "historical consciousness will go away if humanity unlearns what it has learned arduously enough over the past centuries; the renunciation of historical consciousness is identical with the relapse into a stage of lesser reflection. . . . Historical consciousness is—one cannot emphasize this strongly enough—according to its own view a stage of higher awareness: we know more than the earlier generations; we know more deeply, more profoundly, than the earlier ones that everything human is historically conditioned. Strauss (1932), 245–46.

morally significant or meaningful “life,” as something the ancients would have fully expected, though the particular forms of that reaction were not inevitable. His studies permitted a questioning of modern rationalism and the historicism to which it had given rise.

The turn to the ancients that allowed for this radical questioning of modern political philosophy and of the historicism to which it had given rise might best be grasped by observing an agreement and a disagreement that Strauss has with Hegel. The agreement is visible in Strauss' quoting of the following passage from *The Phenomenology*:

The manner of study in ancient times is distinct from that of modern times, in that the former consisted in a veritable training and perfecting of the natural consciousness. Trying its powers at each part of its life severally [*an jedem Teile seines Daseins sich besonders versuchend*], and philosophizing about everything it came across, the natural consciousness transformed itself into a universality of abstract understanding which was active in every matter and in every respect. In modern times, however, the individual finds the abstract form ready made.²⁶

Strauss agrees with Hegel that, unlike ancient ideas, which were derived directly from impressions, modern ideas had their origin in the transformation of ideas, and so required intellectual history for their clarification. Hegel's was a sensible approach, one might say, to modern thought. But as Strauss goes on to indicate, he unlike Hegel finds the ancient, “natural consciousness” superior to the modern abstract consciousness, in which “the problem of the foundations is hidden by progress,”²⁷ and, following Husserl, he has been in search of a recovery of the “natural consciousness.”²⁸ He even suggests in this same place the need for a deconstruction of the tradition, à la Heidegger, to get at that natural consciousness.²⁹ Hegel underestimated the importance of that

26 Hegel, 23. First translated and quoted by Strauss in “History of Philosophy: Its Nature and Its Function. Lecture to be delivered on November 12, 1947—General Seminar [at The New School for Social Research].” 13 sheets, written on both sides with a pen (Leo Strauss Papers, Box 6, Folder 14), page 4 recto. Patard (2014), 273–307, at 283. Subsequently quoted by Strauss in Strauss (1959c), 75.

27 Strauss (1959c), 76.

28 The pointer to Husserl in this passage of “Political Philosophy and History” comes via the reference to Klein's work, in 75n4.

29 Consider his claim in 1959c, 75, concerning the “fundamental concepts” that were “taken for granted” by the moderns. On Strauss' conscious, explicitly Heideggerian intent in

consciousness, and underestimated the enormous effort required to attain a state of what Strauss elsewhere calls “natural ignorance.”³⁰

Strauss had recovered what had been a crucial distinction for all classical philosophy: that between the natural and the conventional. Hegel had replaced this distinction by (and thus had imposed on the ancients) the distinction between the subjective mind (and its reflective reasoning) and the objective mind that expressed itself in living institutions. Where ancient philosophers had spoken of the conventional over and against the natural, Hegel presented the conventional instead as the work of the objective mind or Reason. This is how he came to see Plato and Aristotle, in his famous formulation, as standing vis à vis the sophists as he himself stood vis à vis 18th century rationalism. Plato and Aristotle, he thought, attempted to understand the actual life or the living order of the Greek city as the embodiment of Reason. Strauss came to see this Hegelian view of Plato and Aristotle to be utterly untenable. “For Plato and Aristotle,” he argued, “the best political order is possibly, and even normally, *different* from, and transcendent to, any actual order,” and (like the Kantian philosophy that Hegel saw himself opposing) such as “to prescribe to the city how it ought to be.”³¹ This is what Strauss means when he blames Hegel (in *The City and Man* 240–41) for his failure to pay sufficient attention to “the philosophic concept of the city as exhibited by classical political philosophy.”

Strauss’ disagreement with Hegel about the ancients had another aspect as well. The “natural” consciousness that one finds in Plato and Aristotle is for Hegel, however sophisticated for its time, still radically *undeveloped*, one-sided. Hegel takes the Christian doctrine of the incarnation to signify the unity of eternity and time, or the absolute time. Through that doctrine the Christian consciousness, the “unhappy consciousness,” came to be one torn between this world and the next. Yet that consciousness represents for Hegel an important advance: it includes consciousness of the infinite value of every individual human. The full secularization of that Christian notion is precisely what makes Hegel’s age the absolute age. Classical consciousness was according to Hegel missing this crucial complement, and hence was radically deficient. Prior to Strauss no thinker since Hegel, including Nietzsche and Heidegger, had called this aspect of Hegelianism—the transformation and “progress” of human

use of “taking for granted” or “neglect” (*versäumt*), see the very illuminating remarks of Heinrich Meier in Meier (2006), 62n10.

30 See Strauss’ review of Julius Ebbinghaus’ booklet *Über die Fortschritte der Metaphysik*, in Meier (1997), 438–39.

31 “Natural Right” Lecture, Patard (2014), 385–420, at 408.

consciousness through the Christian teaching—into question.³² And no thinker had therefore been able genuinely to take seriously, as possibly altogether true, the classical philosophers' teaching about human beings.³³

While modern philosophy or science counted on a progressively built edifice, Strauss was interested in the buried foundations of that edifice, and what he called "the problem of the foundations" hidden by progress.³⁴ It was for this reason that, following Husserl, he sought to recover the pre-scientific understanding of which philosophy, as the attempt to understand the whole, could claim to be the natural perfection. For he had found in Platonic philosophizing, as *political* philosophizing, classical philosophy's reflection on that pre-scientific understanding and its legitimation, in two senses: concerning whether philosophy is possible, and concerning whether it is good or right.

4 Recovery of the "Natural World"

Strauss' study with Husserl, whom he came to consider the one genuine philosopher whom he had encountered,³⁵ in the midst of the crisis of science

32 For Nietzsche's account of Christianity's contribution to a progress of human consciousness, see especially his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Part 1: prior to the triumph of the Christian self-torture of the conscience, of the Slave's will to power turned against itself, humans lacked "depth" and even a "soul;" there was only the self-affirmation of the blonde beast. In short, Nietzsche is as much an admirer of what he considers the subterranean Christian will to power as he is a horrified witness of its potential result in the Last Man.

33 For Strauss' disagreement with Gerhard Krüger on this score, see Pangle (2014), especially 65–8. For his disagreement with Karl Löwith on this score, see Burns (2014a), 87–9.

34 Strauss (1959c), 75–6. See also the earlier formulation in "History of Philosophy: Its Nature and Its Function. Lecture to be delivered on November 12, 1947, General Seminar [at the New School for Social Research]," 13 sheets, written on both sides with a pen (Leo Strauss Papers, Box 6, Folder 14), pp. 4 recto–4 verso. Patard (2014), 273–307, at 283–85. In the earlier formulation, "problem" is underscored. Consider also Strauss (1956), 305: "[S]cience, Husserl taught, is derivative from our primary knowledge of the world of things; science is not the perfection of man's understanding of the world, but a specific modification of that pre-scientific understanding. The meaningful genesis of science out of pre-scientific understanding is a problem; the primary theme is the philosophical understanding of the pre-scientific world . . ."

35 "[A]ll present-day philosophy, that is not in one way or another historical, is barren or superficial. If a proof were needed, it would be supplied by the most important, nay, the only important philosophic event of our century, the emergence of phenomenology. Husserl eventually rejected in solemn and explicit terms what he called the accepted distinction between philosophic and historical investigations." "History of Philosophy:

or philosophy that had overtaken Europe since the time of Hegel, led him to join Husserl's search for an understanding of the natural world out of which emerged the scientific world, and so eventually to a full return to the ancients—one unsuccessfully attempted by both Husserl and Heidegger. In his courses at the New School in the 1940s Strauss had already composed an argument about the problem that would find its way into *Natural Right and History*.

The fundamental weakness of these [neo-Kantian and positivist] forms of epistemology was clearly stated by Husserl: since the natural understanding is the basis of the scientific understanding, one cannot analyze science, and the world of science, before one has analyzed the natural understanding, the natural world view, and the natural world. The natural world, the world in which we live and act, is not yet the object, or the product, of a theoretical attitude; it is a world, not of objects at which we detachedly look, but of things or affairs which we handle. It is a pre-theoretical and hence a pre-scientific world.³⁶

Husserl had thus led Strauss to see the problem with the modern attempt to incorporate moral-political action and its objects into a theoretical system. But there was (and is) a difficulty in attempting to get at that Husserlian “natural world,” a difficulty that both Husserl and Heidegger had overlooked. Strauss therefore offers this correction of the phenomenological starting point:

[T]he natural world, if it is identified with the world in which we live [today], is a mere construct. The world in which we live is already the product of science, or at any rate is radically determined by the existence of science. To say nothing of technology, the world in which we live is free from ghosts, witches, demons, etc., and, but for the existence of science, it would abound with beings of that kind.³⁷

Its Nature and Its Function. Lecture to be delivered on November 12, 1947, General Seminar [at the New School for Social Research],” 13 sheets, written on both sides with a pen (Leo Strauss Papers, Box 6, Folder 14), appearing on the page that is the second version of the beginning, verso. Patard (2014), 273–307, at 278. See also Strauss' reference to Husserl as a philosopher in Strauss (1956), 304–05.

36 “History of Philosophy: Its Nature and Its Function. Lecture to be delivered on November 12, 1947—General Seminar.” 13 sheets, written on both sides with a pen (Leo Strauss Papers, Box 6, Folder 14), 6 recto, Patard (2014), 273–307, at 288. Compare Strauss (1953), chapter two, 79.

37 “History of Philosophy: Its Nature and Its Function,” Patard (2014), 273–307, at 288. Compare Strauss (1953), chapter two, 79.

The “natural world” of phenomenology is a world that is already the product of the diffusion of science. In contrast to it, Strauss discovered in the writings of Farabi and Maimonides, and through them in the Platonic dialogues, a presentation of the “natural world” (in the Husserlian sense, that is, the pre-scientific world) as the world of *nomos*, especially of *divine* law, and the world of theory, science, or philosophy as therefore an *extreme* possibility of human existence, one not likely to be found in most places and radically at odds with the way of life of most human beings.

That is, Strauss had found a solution to the difficulty of the existence of a scientifically altered world in the writings of classical philosophers:

To get hold of the natural world, as a world that is radically pre-philosophic or pre-scientific, one has to go back behind the first emergence of science or philosophy. It is not necessary for this purpose to engage in endless and hypothetical ethnological or anthropological studies. The information supplied by classical philosophy about its origins suffices, especially if it is supplemented by consideration of the basic premises of the Bible, for reconstructing the essential elements of the natural world.”³⁸

The Husserlian “natural world,” as Strauss eventually went on in chapter three of *NRH* to argue, is disclosed by the discovery of *phusis*. The Husserlian attempt to understand the pre-scientific world could be found in the writings of classical philosophers because, unlike the modern world, the world in which ancient philosophers lived and wrote was not a world that was transformed, nor that those philosophers were attempting to transform, into one in which the scientific spirit infused life or determined human thinking. As Strauss put it in another lecture, “[A]ccording to Aristotle, the scientific spirit is not absolutely later than the pre-scientific spirit: in one respect, they are contemporary: only a small minority of men can ever become men of science; the majority of men think, at all times, pre-scientifically.”³⁹

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Strauss thought the evidence for the natural, pre-scientific “world” was available in the works of the ancients accidentally. To the contrary: Strauss had discovered that addressing the grounding of science was the guiding intention of Socratic political philosophy, of the

38 “History of Philosophy: Its Nature and Its Function,” Patard (2014), 273–307, at 288. Compare Strauss (1953), chapter two, 79–80.

39 “Research in the History of Ideas,” Summer Course 1942. 23 numbered pages, written with a pen (Leo Strauss Papers, Box 6, Folder 14), 10, Patard (2014), 233–71, at 244.

Socratic turn to speeches/dialectic. “One may say that the Platonic dialogues serve no more obvious purpose than precisely this one: to answer the question, Why philosophy? or, Why science? by justifying philosophy or science before the tribunal of the city, the political community . . . [or] before the tribunal of the law.”⁴⁰ And this meant that the dialogues in which one sees the grounding activity of philosophy—of its necessary engagement with those devoted not to theory or science but to law and what law stood for—would necessarily preserve the pre-philosophic, pre-scientific understanding, “consciousness,” or “world,” as indeed we see it preserved in the Socratic dialogues of Plato and Xenophon. Finally, as Strauss indicates in the fourth chapter of *Natural Right and History*, the original Socratic turn that resulted in this grounding effort was undertaken because of a recognized difficulty besetting philosophy, a difficulty with understanding the ultimate causes of things. That is, the reason that the question of the true beginning point of inquiry, or a settling of the elementary or fundamental question, is so important in the Platonic dialogues was that Socrates had come to doubt seriously that full knowledge of the principles of things, of what is first in itself, is possible.

5 The Grounding of the Philosophic or Scientific Life

That doubt is recaptured and preserved in Strauss’ celebrated exchange with Alexandre Kojève. The claim that the ancients were right entails a “presupposition” about “nature,” he admits in the conspicuous concluding paragraph of the “Restatement,” his rejoinder to Kojève. And he goes out of his way to address these “absolute presuppositions” of classical philosophy, using the language of historical thinkers like Kojève and Heidegger.⁴¹

For the question arises immediately whether the idea of philosophy is not itself in need of legitimation. Philosophy in the strict and classical sense is quest for the eternal order or for the eternal cause or causes of all things. It presupposes then that there is an eternal and unchangeable order within which History takes place and which is not in any way affected by History. It presupposes in other words that any “realm of freedom” is no more than a dependent province within “the realm of necessity.” It presupposes, in the words of Kojève, that “Being is essentially

40 Strauss (1944), 216–17.

41 On the term “absolute presuppositions,” see Strauss (1956), 310.

immutable in itself and eternally identical with itself." This presupposition is not self-evident.

As he does elsewhere (often by using a quietly disjunctive "or") Strauss here presents a series of possibilities, in this case, a list of possible "presuppositions" of philosophy (the last of which is explicitly stated in Kojève's own words, not in Strauss'). The statements are not simple equivalents, and Strauss leaves it to the reader to discern which is most seriously intended. But he indicates elsewhere that one version of these presuppositions concerning the possibility of science is true, and that *the* alternatives to this presupposition are either the Biblical doctrine of creation or Heidegger's doctrine of *Dasein*, both of which are fatal to philosophy. The passage I have in mind, which occurs in *Natural Right and History*, chapter three, is arrived at after Strauss has given an account of the emergence of philosophy or science through the discovery of "nature:"

The philosophic quest for first things presupposes not merely that there are first things but that the first things are always and that things which are always or are imperishable are more truly beings than the things which are not always. These presuppositions follow from the fundamental premise that no being emerges without a cause or that it is impossible that "at first Chaos came to be," i.e., that the first things jumped into being out of nothing and through nothing. In other words, the manifest changes would be impossible if there did not exist something permanent or eternal, or the manifest contingent beings require the existence of something necessary and therefore eternal. . . . One may express the same fundamental premise also by saying that "omnipotence" means power limited by knowledge of "natures," that is to say, of unchangeable and knowable necessity; all freedom and indeterminacy presuppose a more fundamental necessity. (Strauss 1953, 89–90)

Strauss nowhere implies that the "necessity" in question is Being (*ousia*), nor does he suggest that the first things to which he refers are *knowable*. He does argue clearly—if implicitly—against Heidegger's claim that the classical premise that "to be" means "to be always" follows from the understanding that "to be" means "to be present."⁴² It instead follows, Strauss points out, from the premise—required by the original meaning, genesis, and motivation of

42 "[According to Heidegger] Greek philosophy was guided by an idea of *Sein* according to which *Sein* means to be 'at hand,' to be present, and therefore *Sein* in the highest sense to be always present, to be always." Strauss (1970), 328. See also Strauss (1953), 30–1.

science or philosophy, Socratic or pre-Socratic, to know what is by nature, or is there independent of any will human or divine—that *no being emerges without a cause* (in Latin, *ex nihilo nihil fit*), a proposition Heidegger for his part tries to avoid addressing. Still elsewhere Strauss presents the implied Heideggerian (and explicit Biblical) alternative to this claim as *ex nihilo et a nihilo omnia fiunt*,⁴³ which would indeed render all unintelligible. Heidegger's account of the motivation of classical philosophy was, then, quite mistaken. Yet it remains true that one cannot justify science or philosophy if its "presupposition," the principle of sufficient reason or cause, is merely the result of a choice or decision, rather than demonstrated.

Passages in chapter four of *Natural Right and History*, a chapter to which Strauss later explicitly directed Kojève, help us to see that because there was indeed thought to be a problem with knowing the first causes or necessities, science was thought by Socrates to be endangered. Strauss there presents the new Socratic approach to the study of nature as a whole—the attempt to learn “what each of the beings is”—as entailing a turn away from the pre-Socratic attempt to discover the first things or underlying causes of all the beings, a turn made when that earlier attempt came to seem to Socrates to be impossible. The new Socratic approach had therefore to be open, in a way that pre-Socratic philosophy had not been, to the possibility that a divine source was responsible for those beings. And so Socrates had to commence a new approach to settling the decisive question—which *had* to be settled—of whether those underlying sources were indeed causes or were instead divinely made beings. He had to settle the matter of whether what *appear* to be necessities are not actual necessities but the work of a god or gods who make all beings come into being out of nothing. It is to settling this matter that the dialogues of Plato and Xenophon are directed.

Strauss' extraordinary claim is that this intention of classical political philosophy was successful, and was *overlooked* by the moderns, who therefore turned to a different attempt to resolve the problem, an attempt that entailed both what we have (following Strauss) called a “retreat into consciousness” or to an “artificial island,” and an attempt to transform the given world, or to erect the City of Man “on the ruins of the City of God.”⁴⁴ In his first book-length examination of an ancient text, *On Tyranny*, Strauss began the publication of his recovery of the classical grounding of science or philosophy, examining a dialogue resulting from a Socratic's turn to the human things.

43 Strauss (1970), 327–29.

44 Strauss (1953), 175.

6 Strauss' "On Tyranny"⁴⁵

All of the themes of Strauss' work to which we have drawn attention and that direct his recovery of classical political thought are present in his first book on a classical political philosopher, *On Tyranny*. Strauss presents the work as needed for anyone who wishes "to bring to light the deepest roots of modern political thought," as he puts it in the fifth paragraph of *On Tyranny*. Later, in the "Restatement," he argues that the reading and re-reading of the *Hiero* will in the best case produce a "change of orientation" in the reader.⁴⁶ He explains here at some length the need to approach Socratic political science, or any thought of the past, in a non-historicist manner if one expects genuinely to understand it. And here, before the publication of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* or of *Natural Right and History*, he makes the case for exoteric or Socratic rhetoric as something to which historicism has made us oblivious. The essay explicitly sets out to train those who would read classical texts so that a future generation will find "cumbersome introductions like the present study" superfluous (28). And indeed, especially in contrast to his two subsequent books on Xenophon's work, which are notoriously difficult of access or require patience of a different sort than does this work, *On Tyranny* spells out very many details, even in its chapter divisions ("The Title," "The Setting," etc.). Yet this work, too, is not without reticence.

Strauss presents the "theoretical teaching" of the *Hiero* as "the problem of law and legitimacy" (76), or "the problematic character of the 'rule of laws,'" a "grave, not to say awe-inspiring, subject" addressed also by a stranger, the Eleatic Stranger, in Plato's *Statesman* (whose aim is a critique of divine law). It is a teaching that serves the purpose "of bringing to light the nature of political things." The work presents "a most striking expression of the problem, or of the problematic character, of law and legitimacy." That problem is the imperfect or even "blind" character of legal justice, and the unwise character of the rule of legitimate government (99).

It is Simonides who grasps that problem, and confirms his grasp of it through dialectic, which causes him to lead a life altogether different from that of Hiero. The tyrant Hiero proves, surprisingly, to have a "citizen spirit," or to be "attached to his city," while Simonides is able to "live as a stranger" (57; cf. 76b).

45 The very brief remarks that follow examine *On Tyranny* strictly with a view to the themes of Strauss' work to which I have called attention. For a richer and far more comprehensive examination of *On Tyranny*, see Erik Buzzetti's "A Guide to the Study of Leo Strauss' *On Tyranny*," chapter 10 of this volume.

46 Strauss (1991), 185. Subsequent parenthetical page numbers in the text are to this work.

Relatedly, Strauss notes Hiero's "desire to be loved by human beings," characterizing it as an "erotic desire" to be loved indiscriminately. Eros causes the tyrant "to become the willing servant and benefactor of all his subjects" (88). By contrast Simonides, "the wise man," "has no such desire." He is "satisfied with the admiration . . . of a small minority" (88) whose benefactor he needs not even be (90), and is ultimately satisfied with self-admiration (88, with 102). Grasping the problem of law appears to have the amazing effect of dissipating the erotic desire that is at the root of public service.

We earlier noted the final sentence of *On Tyranny* and how Strauss there promises in a subsequent work or series of works "a comprehensive and detailed analysis of Xenophon's Socratic writings." This promise is explicitly tied to the theme of divine law and its problematic. The promised analysis will determine according to Strauss what the "attitude of the citizen-philosopher Socrates" is to gentlemanliness, that is—as he indicates—to belief that the natural order is traceable to gods, that the laws "praise" that order rather than compelling us, and that obedience to law is therefore intrinsically pleasant. The alternative to this gentlemanliness, of which the representative in Xenophon's writings is Ischomachus of the *Oeconomicus*, entails the view held by both Hiero and Simonides that the natural order is traceable to chance, that the laws therefore "compel" certain actions and feelings, and that obeying the laws is not intrinsically pleasant.⁴⁷ As the footnotes to Strauss' study of the *Hiero*, and indeed his comparison of Hiero and Simonides to Ischomachus, make plain, Strauss had already himself undertaken extensive study of Xenophon's Socratic writings when he composed *On Tyranny*. He had, that is, already at this time come to see the Socratic attention to the question of gentlemanliness as the path to the resolution of the question of the gods. And he had therefore come to see the philosophic life as not merely distinct from but different in kind from political life.

7 Strauss's "Restatement"

As he had spoken in *On Tyranny* of "the problem of law," so Strauss speaks in the "Restatement" of "the problem of virtue," picking up where he left off in

47 Strauss (1991), 105. Consider in this regard Strauss' statement to Klein, February 16, 1939, Meier (2001), 537–38: "Anyway, the moral is also in [Xenophon] purely exoteric, and about one word out of two is ambiguous. *Kaloskagathos* was in the Socratic 'circle' an injurious word, as well as 'philistine' or 'bourgeois' in the 19th century." Translated in Patard (2014), 28.

the concluding paragraph of *On Tyranny* by showing that at least according to Plato, as shown in the myth of Er (*Republic* x), "there is no adequate solution to the problem of virtue or happiness on the political or social plane" (182). Strauss also returns to and elaborates on his claim concerning the philosopher's self-admiration or lack of need of others. And he returns to the related subject of erotic desire and political life or public service.

As with Krüger and Löwith earlier in his life, so here Strauss draws attention to the fact that Eric Voegelin and Kojève both claim in different ways that classical thought is not helpful to us today without the introduction of an element of biblical thought (178, 183, 189). (Strauss devotes more attention to Kojève's version of this argument than to Voegelin's.) The biblical element in Kojève's presentation is what the Hegelian calls the morality of the Slave. Kojève claims that the Master-Slave synthesis is adequate to explain modern *and* classical thought, or to get at the truth of the matter, as Hegel had done. The Master, in love with honor, eventually discovers that he also is "conscientious," or admires himself for completing a given task well, which is the Slave's means of finding dignity. The alleged result is the Master's envelopment in the final state of mutual reciprocal recognition.

Strauss attacks both parts of the Hegelian synthesis of biblical and classical morality. He first objects that, unlike either of the two components that it allegedly retains, the synthesized mutual reciprocal "recognition" is not at all stern or morally demanding (191–92), as indeed one can see in the Hegelian replacement of "virtue" by "freedom." This is related to the absence of any hint of the divine or sacred in "recognition;" other humans bestow it, and it is allegedly all that our hearts desire. Experiences that involve the divine—guilt or unworthiness or need for forgiveness, awe or need to revere or bow to the divine, hope for redemption—such must have been merely wayward manifestations or earlier intimations of the desire for human recognition. Here is visible, in other words, the long-standing modern promise of a fully rational, atheistic society, whose articulation by Kojève Strauss was undoubtedly counting on when he asked him to respond to *On Tyranny*. He informs his readers that Kojève is fully aware of the modern, Hobbesian origin of Hegel's doctrine of human society. (This was to be the subject of a projected book.) He criticizes Kojève for his failure to acknowledge the "untrue assumption" on which both the Hobbesian and the Hegelian constructions rest, *viz.*, that "man is thinkable as a being who lacks awareness of sacred restraints or as a being that is guided by nothing but a desire for recognition" (192). As he had in the first expression of his reorientation (in 1932) noted that the Hobbesian understanding of human evil as bestial and hence innocent evil was inferior to the starting point of Socratic dialectic,

wherein evil is seen as moral depravity,⁴⁸ so does he here critique Kojève for failing to abandon modernity's exclusion of awareness of "sacred restraints" from our moral experiences. Strauss had rediscovered in Socratic political philosophy the need to submit the moral opinions of the pre-scientific, "natural world" to the kind of dialectical scrutiny that one sees in both Xenophon and Plato, and wished to indicate to Kojève the vital role of those opinions in the classical approach to the problem of science or philosophy.

The importance of doing so becomes especially apparent in the second part of Strauss' critique of the Hegelian synthesis, which concerns the Master. Contrary to what Kojève argues, the philosopher does not subscribe to the morality of the Master. Strauss emphasizes the extent to which we can know that the political man or "master" differs from the philosopher: The former loves and seeks to be loved in return, indiscriminately, while the latter seeks admiration only from a small circle of worthies and ultimately from himself (197). Responding directly to Kojève's contempt for the ascription of eros to political men, Strauss this time begins the argument with Xenophon's claim that the household and the city are the same and that Xenophon counts Socrates (whom he has presented as married to the difficult Xanthippe) among the *unmarried* men at the end of his *Symposium*. In the sequel, using arguments drawn largely from Plato, Strauss spells out what this means, stating and then twice repeating the claim that the philosopher, unlike most human beings—"political men"—does not succumb to the temptation to think human things have great significance, since "his dominating passion is the desire for truth, i.e., for knowledge of . . . the eternal causes or causes of the whole" (197–98). It is noteworthy that while Plato, in the section of the *Republic* to which Strauss here makes explicit supporting reference, might be taken to suggest that the philosopher is moved by an *erotic* love of the truth,⁴⁹ Strauss refrains from using this expression. He speaks instead of the philosopher's "dominating passion," reserving the term "erotic desire" for his description of the political man. While "the political man is consumed by erotic desire . . . in principle for all human beings" (198), the philosopher is "radically detached from human beings as human beings" (199; cf. 212). Now Strauss does, to be sure, refer subsequently to

48 Strauss (1965), "Preface," 19, with "Comments on *Der Begriff Des Politischen* by Carl Schmitt," 344–45.

49 Strauss refers on 198 to *Republic* 486a, a passage that is part of a description of the virtues of the philosopher that begins at 485b. I wish to stress that even Plato might only be *taken* to suggest this. He actually has Socrates merely draw a *parallel* between someone who is "by nature erotically disposed toward someone" and the lover of wisdom (485c1; cf. 474c7–475a2); he does not say that the lover of wisdom is erotic.

"true or Socratic *eros*" (202), but what he says here (on 198) makes clear that the qualifier "true or Socratic" is indicative of a difference in kind, resulting from a shedding or falling away of *eros* in the usual sense, in the philosopher. For *eros* is, Strauss goes on to say, "an attachment to beings which prompts one to serve them," and "erotic desire craves reciprocity," while the philosopher seeks only to understand the whole, not to serve it or to be loved by it. Erotic desire is, moreover, always a desire for some eternal human good, the attainment of which depends on human deeds having great significance, but the philosopher is characterized by his awareness that there is no such significance and hence no such good: "all human things and all human concerns reveal themselves to him in all clarity as paltry and ephemeral, and no one can find solid happiness in what he knows to be paltry and ephemeral" (198). For the philosopher, as Strauss says next, echoing Plato's *Phaedo*, is fully aware that "what has come into being must perish again" (200), tries "to make it his sole business to die and to be dead" (199). He is "penetrated by a sense of the ultimate futility of all human causes" (202; cf. 203, "liberation from the most potent natural charm"). Strauss' argument against the existence of *eros* in the philosopher even approaches the (exaggerated) claim of Maimonides that the philosopher needs others only for "the needs of his body" (199).

What Strauss argues (with remarkable frankness) in these passages is helpful for understanding what he later describes, in *Natural Right and History*, as the modern attempt at "enhancing the status of man and of his 'world' by making him oblivious of the whole or of eternity," an enhancing, he argues, that characterizes modern thought from Hobbes to Heidegger.⁵⁰ By "oblivion of eternity" he means oblivion of human mortality in light of eternity. It is the moderns, Strauss claims—including "Hegel above all"—who occlude our full and gripping awareness of death—of the ultimate futility of all our deeds and the greatly diminished significance of the human things that this implies, so that they come to think that we can be completely *at home*, or satisfied, on earth (212), rather than having to be resigned to the unavailability of such satisfaction. This loss of awareness of eternity is even required, Strauss argues, for philosophy to become (as it did only in modern times) revolutionary, to hope for this-worldly satisfaction, and even to have been initially disappointed by the failure of Providential care so as to seek a human solution to the human problem. In other words it is indeed owing to Biblical thought—to a disappointment with its promise of a world providentially redeemed from sufferings—that "[m]odern man" is dissatisfied with utopias.⁵¹

50 Strauss (1953), 175–76.

51 "Restatement," 210, with Strauss (1964), 41–43, and see Burns (2014b), 152–54n20.

It is true that this quite radical argument is soon modified or softened by Strauss' claim that the philosopher acts beneficently where he can, and that he does indeed have significant love or friendship (*philia*) for certain human beings—namely, for potential philosophers, whose souls “reflect the eternal order” by being “well-ordered souls” (200–01). Yet Strauss then admits that this new argument (which he had already indicated was made in a “popular and hence unorthodox manner”) is defective: it can't explain, for example, the souls of the pre-Socratic philosophers or modern philosophers, who certainly did not think the whole harmonious (201). More importantly, it presents the activity of Socratic dialectic as a search born of a desire for friends. It thereby abstracts from the theoretical intention of dialectics as it is presented, for example, in Book Seven of the *Republic*—as the novel attempt to ground the philosophic life.

Strauss soon alludes to that actual intention, in fact, when referring to the contradictory character of the opinions of Socrates' interlocutors:

If the philosopher, trying to remedy the deficiency of “subjective certainty,” engages in conversation with others and observes again and again that his interlocutors, as they themselves are forced to admit, involve themselves in self-contradictions or are unable to give any account of their questionable contentions, he will be reasonably confirmed in his estimate of himself. . . . (204)

Dialectic confirms for the Socratic philosopher that his is the right path. If Kojève expects the philosopher to be out looking for some way to increase his insurance against the subjectivity of the cloister, Strauss presents the philosopher's activity in the marketplace as having a related but different, or at least additional end: confirming something essential to the philosophic enterprise, something that the philosophic enterprise proper could not confirm.

Kojève had spoken of “conscientious” work, or doing one's duty for no other reason than duty, as the eventual activity of all human beings—including the philosopher. Strauss speaks of the philosopher having self-admiration, and being “in *this* respect” like someone who has a good conscience, that is, in not relying on the opinion of others (204, emphasis added). He thereby points to the fact that the philosopher is *not* moved by a conscience in the manner that Kojève believes. And as he adds a little later, the philosopher goes to the marketplace and engages in dialectic for a second reason, “to fish there for potential philosophers” (205), that is, for those rare individuals for whom self-contradictions will result not in anger or indifference but in a reorientation toward the philosophic life. The ramifications of that reorientation are sug-

gested, finally, when Strauss describes another activity of the philosopher—his “philosophic politics”—as consisting in among other things “satisfying the city that the philosophers are not atheists, that they do not desecrate everything sacred to the city, that they reverence what the city reverences” (205–06). Here, indirectly, Strauss lets out the most important aspect of the (rare) result of accepting the results of dialectics, or of acknowledging the lack of significance of human affairs.

The correspondence between Strauss and Kojève that took place after the publication of their debate confirms these observations. In a letter dated 11 April 1957, Kojève presents the conventional Hegelian reading of Plato according to which Socrates saves justice, rescuing by reasoning with them those who had fallen victim to the sophists. Kojève goes so far as to claim that the Platonic teaching that all knowledge is recollection (*anamnesis*) is a mythical presentation of the fact of the conscience—of our innate knowledge of good and evil.⁵² In his letter of reply Strauss says bluntly:

There is no “conscience” in Plato; *anamnesis* is not conscience (see *Natural Right and History*, p. 150n. re Polemarchus). Indeed, misology is the worst . . . therefore, there is ultimately no superiority of the merely honorable man to the sophist (contrary to Kant) or for that matter to Alcibiades (cf. N.R. & H, p. 151).⁵³

The pages in *Natural Right and History* (as well as the four or so leading up to them) to which Strauss here points Kojève are some of the most radical and far-reaching of any that he published. Most notable for our purposes is that Strauss refers in the note on page 150 to Socrates as not a preacher of justice but as one who patiently investigates the *problem* of justice—of justice that cannot exist without divine providence—by examining the “citizen morality” found in a man like Polemarchus.

8 A Word on the Present Volume

The essays in this volume examine most of Strauss' published writings and lectures on classical thought. They will be especially welcome in view of the fact that, as mentioned, Strauss' writings are not easily accessible to contemporary students and scholars. He can be elusive, suggestive, and sometimes downright

⁵² Strauss (1991), 266–67.

⁵³ Strauss (1991), 275.

cryptic. (In *Socrates and Aristophanes*, for example, he states: “How this judgment must be restated in the light of [Aristophanes’] suggestions regarding the being of the gods has been stated with utmost clarity in the proper place” [p. 313]). The contributors to the volume have spent many years thinking through Strauss’ writings (and the classical texts that they interpret), and have aimed to make those writings more accessible through careful arguments that are as straightforward and clear as the subject matter permits.

The volume is divided into six sections. The first has two essays on Strauss’ writings on non-Socratic classical thinkers (including Lucretius, as representative of Epicureanism). The second is devoted to three of Strauss’ writings on classical political philosophy in general. The third looks at his writings on Aristophanes, to which he devoted an entire book. The fourth is on Xenophon, who was as we have noted the first classical author to whose work Strauss devoted a single extended essay and, subsequently, three books. The fifth contains essays on Strauss’ extensive studies of Plato, whose dialogues Strauss considered the key to the grounding of the rational life and hence to the recovery of philosophy. The sixth examines Strauss’ only published work on Aristotle.

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PART 1

Pre-Socratic Thought



On “The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right” in *Natural Right and History*

Gregory A. McBrayer

1 Introduction

The central theme of Strauss’ *Natural Right and History* is the possibility of philosophy, which had come to be doubted in Strauss’s time partly as a result of the prevalence of historicism. By insisting on the relativity of all human knowledge, historicism undermines the possibility of science or philosophy and is responsible for what Strauss calls the “cave beneath the cave.” So after having shown the weakness of the historicist argument in Chapter One, and having outlined in Chapter Two Weber’s inadequate attempt to rescue science in historicism’s wake, Strauss begins to try to reestablish the possibility of philosophy in Chapter Three. According to Strauss, philosophy is the precondition of the discovery of the idea of natural right, and “a political life that does not know of the idea of natural right is necessarily unaware of the possibility of political science and, indeed, of the possibility of science as such . . .” (81).¹ So in Chapter Three of *Natural Right and History*, “The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right,” Strauss adumbrates the emergence of philosophy or science as articulated in the writings of the classical philosophers and he supplements this account with considerations of biblical premises, guided by the judgment that doing so will somehow help us to understand the pre-philosophic “natural” world or world of common sense (79–80). Strauss presents the origin of the idea of natural right as a series of confusions or inchoate ideas or longings that are expressed once the discovery of nature has shattered the pre-philosophic understanding of the world. In Chapter Three, Strauss aims, above all, to show that natural right is a problem, and in this he succeeds. He does not, however,

* This paper has benefited from an unpublished lecture by David Bolotin, “On Chapters Three and Four of *Natural Right and History*,” delivered at Michigan State University, April 20, 2001. I would like to thank Robert C. Bartlett, Jonathan W. Pidluzny, and Timothy W. Burns for reading and commenting on early drafts of this essay.

1 All parenthetical page references are to *Natural Right and History*.

establish the existence of natural right. The chapter thus serves as a prelude for Chapter Four, where Strauss presents the account of natural right developed by Socrates.

Chapter Three is devoted to the emergence of philosophy, which is to say the discovery of nature and the effect this discovery had on attitudes toward political affairs prior to the emergence of political philosophy. Since Strauss follows tradition in presenting Socrates as the founder of political philosophy, Chapter Three focuses principally on an analysis of pre-Socratic philosophy. The chapter consists of three parts. In the first, Strauss provides an account of the discovery of nature through the quest for first things or principles and, to a lesser extent, through the quest for the right way (81–97). Since there is a strong tendency, once nature has been discovered, to believe that all right is conventional, Strauss discusses “conventionalism” in the second and longest part. He explains how the discovery of nature understandably led to the view that all right is by convention and against nature, and he here examines the conventionalist argument in both its philosophic and vulgar forms (97–117). In the third and concluding part, Strauss briefly outlines and criticizes pre-Socratic natural right (118–19). This conclusion indicates a number of problems with pre-Socratic philosophy and prepares the way for Strauss’s account of Classical Political Philosophy in the next chapter. The chief shortcoming of pre-Socratic philosophy seems to derive from its inability to ground the possibility of philosophy, and this is somehow connected to its tendency to devolve into conventionalism. In this chapter, then, Strauss outlines the origin of philosophy, explains why philosophy originally had an inadequate grounding, and foreshadows the way to a more solid grounding for philosophy through Socratic political philosophy.

2 The Emergence of Philosophy

The first part of the chapter outlines the discovery of nature. Nature had to have been discovered prior to the discovery of what is right by nature; philosophy had to emerge prior to the emergence of political philosophy. The first thinkers were not necessarily looking for nature—something wholly unknown cannot be sought. Rather, the philosophic quest was at first the quest for “principles” or “the first things” (82). Prior to the emergence of philosophy, the chief characteristic of a thing or class of things was conceived of as its custom or its way. No fundamental distinction was made between “ways” that are natural, on one hand, and “ways” that are merely customary, on the other:

Barking and wagging the tail is the way of dogs, menstruation is the way of women, the crazy things done by madmen are the way of madmen, just as not eating pork is the way of the Jews and not drinking wine is the way of Moslems (82–3).²

Insofar as the characteristic that distinguished a thing or a group of things was conceived of as its way, the original, pre-philosophic quest was for the right (human) way. A community tends to identify its way with the right way, and the rightness of its way is guaranteed by its oldness: "the right way necessarily implies thoughts about the ancestors and hence about the first things simply" (83). The identification of the right way with the ancestral ordinarily manifests itself in deification of one's ancestors as well as the deification of the laws they laid down. The ancestral way thus takes on the form of a divine law. Now, in order to discover an alternative account of the first things or of the right way, one must be led to question or doubt the authority of the ancestral, the divine status of the law. The fact of a variety of law codes certainly leads to difficulties, and the fact that the various law codes prescribe and proscribe different actions is of great importance, but even more importantly, the various law codes offer different accounts of the "first things." Liberated from authority by these difficulties, a human being with the right nature can reflect on the opinions offered by the various law codes, comparing them in order to see which might provide the right way. This will become the quest for the good as distinguished from the ancestral (86), a quest that led to the discovery of what is by nature. That discovery was in turn guided by two fundamental, commonsense distinctions: "Nature was discovered when man embarked on the quest for the first things in light of the fundamental distinctions between hearsay and seeing with one's own eyes, on the one hand, and between things made by man and things not made by man, on the other" (88). The momentous discovery of nature marks, Strauss argues, the emergence of a particular human type, the philosopher. "It can be said," declares Strauss, "that the discovery of nature is identical with the actualization of a human possibility which, at least according to its own interpretation, is trans-historical, trans-social, trans-moral, and trans-religious" (89).³

² Cf. Genesis 31:35.

³ This conclusion appears to be aimed at Heidegger, who held that "the essential limitation of Greek ontology shows itself in the fact that the Greeks understood by 'to be' 'to be present or near.'" Strauss (1959), 248. According to Heidegger, this understanding is Socratic and disastrous (insofar as it excludes all being that is not present) and different from that of the

The first philosophers embarked on this quest for first things presupposing that there are first things, that the first things “are always and that things which are always or are imperishable are more truly beings than the things which are not always” (89). These presuppositions, in turn, rest on a deeper, more fundamental presupposition: pre-Socratic philosophy rested on the presupposition of the existence of “something necessary and therefore eternal.” These presuppositions, to which Heidegger had drawn attention and which had, he argued, rested on the understanding that “to be” meant “to be present,” have according to Strauss a different source:

These presuppositions follow from the fundamental premise that no being emerges without a cause or that it is impossible that “at first Chaos came to be,” i.e., that the first things jumped into being out of nothing and through nothing” (89).

It is this premise, *ex nihilo nihil fit*, that according to Strauss explains the claim that there are or must be beings that are always, and this claim stands against the stated claim of Hesiod and of the Bible that beings emerge without a cause, out of nothing and through nothing, which is also the direction in which Heidegger’s thought necessarily moves.⁴

Despite this disagreement, Strauss is in agreement with Heidegger that philosophy as it appears initially was grounded on a presupposition: according to Strauss, pre-Socratic philosophers believed that they knew with certainty that there is a fixed, ordered, and intelligible whole, when in fact they did not. But of course their entire activity required that there be an intelligible whole if their activity was not to be absurd or something no one in his right mind would choose. Thus, regarding the question of decisive importance, the question of the choice-worthiness of its own way of life, pre-Socratic philosophy was unaware of its own ignorance. It is here, in the context of speaking of this presupposition in favor of a fixed natural order, that Strauss quotes (without citing) Hesiod’s report of the Muses’ claim that “At first Chaos came to be.”⁵

pre-Socratics. It should be kept in mind that the primary opponent of Strauss’ position, here and throughout *Natural Right and History*, is Heidegger, the “radical historicist” of Chapter One (see esp. 26–34), whose thought is largely responsible for the inquiry into natural right: “Radical historicism compels us to realize the bearing of the fact that the very idea of natural right presupposes the possibility of philosophy in the full and original meaning of the term” (31). See Bruell (2011), 97.

4 See “Was ist Metaphysik?” in Heidegger (2004), 119–20.

5 Hesiod, *Theogony* 116.

Strauss here alludes to the fact that the main assumption of pre-Socratic philosophy bears directly on questions of theology. The pre-Socratics took for granted that the fundamental alternative to philosophy, chaos, is impossible. As David Bolotin says, "This key philosophic premise is equivalent, in other words, to the view that there cannot be any truly omnipotent gods, gods with the power to perform miracles or to bring into being whatever they will."⁶ Perhaps on each of these presuppositions—that there are permanent intelligible necessities behind the perceptible whole and that there are no omnipotent gods whose existence would render such necessities mere appearances—Socrates, about whom we will learn more in the next chapter of *Natural Right and History*, stands distinct from the pre-Socratics.

In any event, the presupposition was fruitful; it facilitated the discovery of nature. Once nature was discovered it became impossible to recognize some "customs" or "ways" as natural; instead they came to light as conventional. As Strauss says, "The distinction between nature and convention, between *physis* and *nomos*, is therefore coeval with the discovery of nature and hence with philosophy" (90). The attitude of the first philosophers toward political things and especially laws was radically different from that of the ancestral citizen, and the authority of the ancestral had come into doubt. The discovery of nature over and against ancestral law inclined philosophers to the opinion that all right is conventional (*nomos*) or that there is nothing that is right by nature.

For nature would not have had to be discovered, Strauss continues, had it not been hidden. It had been hidden by authoritative decisions—by laws and convention. Strauss suggests that the poets were the authors of these authoritative decisions. The poets recognized that human beings need thoughts or opinions about the first things, and that human community requires shared thoughts about the first things—including, above all, the gods (93–94). The law claims to make the first things manifest, but, in reality, law or convention "has the tendency, or the function, to hide nature" (91). Strauss suggests that the mythmakers, insofar as they hide or conceal the "principles" of all things by fashioning an adorned account of the beginnings, may be aware of those "principles" or perhaps even nature. The philosophic discovery of nature thus represents a radical re-orientation away from poetic authority, since the discovery uproots the authority of the ancestral and replaces it with the authority of nature. Or rather, as Strauss says, correcting his own statement, philosophy uproots authority altogether; it recognizes no authority but instead "recognizes nature as *the* standard" (92, emphasis in original). This radical change in understanding need not, of course, manifest itself outwardly. Socrates, as

6 Bolotin (2001).

Strauss relates—suddenly turning briefly from the pre-Socratics to Socrates—“was a very conservative man as far as the ultimate *practical conclusions* of his political philosophy were concerned” (93, emphasis mine), but Strauss makes fairly clear the radical character of Socrates’ thought or speech. Theoretically, the fundamental premise of Socratic philosophy repudiates all claims to authority, even the most natural one, paternal authority—which, in turn, is the basis of ancestral authority (consider 83–84). Strauss thus points to an interesting puzzle: why were some philosophers, and above all Socrates, *apparently* deferential to conventional authority even as they recognized its character? Why did they not openly teach that the conventional was, in the light of the natural, the wrong way, a misguided or merely human way? For Socrates, at least, Strauss here forewarns his readers, resisted the tendency of the first philosophers to turn to conventionalism, the topic of the next part of the chapter.

3 Conventionalism

The discovery of nature does not automatically lead to the discovery of natural right. In fact, as a result of the former discovery, the first philosophers were understandably inclined toward conventionalism. Accordingly, Strauss devotes much of the remainder of Chapter Three to an analysis of conventionalism. Perhaps the biggest puzzle in his presentation of conventionalism is how sympathetically he presents it, especially in its philosophical, as opposed to vulgar, form. Conventionalism is the view that there is nothing right by nature but only by law or custom or human fiat. All distinctions between the just and unjust are a product of human making and agreement. In this context, Strauss reports a saying of Heraclitus, calling it the crucial pre-Socratic text: “In God’s view, all things are fair [noble] and good and just, but men have made the supposition that some things are just and others are unjust” (93). Justice is man-made or conventional, which means “[j]ustice has no superhuman support” (94). To explain this pre-Socratic statement, Strauss curiously repeats the words of Spinoza: “No traces of divine justice are found except where just men reign; otherwise there is one event, as we see, to the righteous and to the wicked” (94).⁷ We see again how clearly the question of natural right

7 Strauss here quotes, with some variation, Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, chap. xix §20. The original runs thus: “No traces of divine justice are found except where just men reign; otherwise there is one event, (to repeat, again Solomon’s words), to the righteous and to the wicked.” While the reference to Spinoza seems out of place in a discussion of the pre-Socratics, much of what came to be Chapter Two and Chapter Three of *Natural Right and*

is bound up with theological questions, and the rejection of divine providence seems decisive in the early philosophers' rejection of natural right. Moreover, the rejection of divine providence opens the pre-Socratics up to the charge of atheism. Theology is a persistent undercurrent of the chapter.

Strauss responds to the Heraclitean text by contending that one need not believe in divine providence, at least not particular divine providence, to admit natural right, and gives the example of Aristotle in support of his contention.⁸ The cosmos or the divine may be indifferent to human affairs, but that does not necessarily mean there are no natural distinctions regarding good and bad for humans. Strauss's sudden attempt to support the idea of natural right thus moves from the terms "just and unjust" to the terms "good and bad." There may in fact be things that are good by nature for human beings; there may even be a life that is good for human beings because it accords with nature. The conventionalist would not, however, deny this contention. "The controversial issue," he says, "is whether the *just* is good (by nature good.) . . ." (95, emp. added). Strauss has yet to establish that there is "natural right" absent the needed cosmic order. Equally problematic, while the conventionalist and the proponent of natural right would agree that there is a life that is *good* by nature, the controversial question has been avoided: Does the life in accordance with nature demand adherence to the requirements of *justice*?

In order clearly to discern the distinction between the natural and the conventional, Strauss says that one must investigate "the origin of the human race." One wonders, however, whether such an inquiry would not necessarily remain conjectural.⁹ At any rate, the question of man's beginnings boils down to two fundamental alternatives: man's beginnings were either perfect or imperfect. The first alternative (which accords with human responsibility or moral freedom) is in accordance with the claims of theology, Strauss says, while the latter is the view of philosophy. It is certainly the view of conventionalists. But Strauss does not attempt to settle the question.

Instead, he turns to an analysis of the standard conventionalist argument with a view to the question of natural right, proceeding dialectically and alternating between adumbrating and criticizing it. All sides agree, he says, that there cannot be natural right if the principles of right are not unchangeable. The conventionalist claims there is great disagreement regarding those principles and will offer the fact of disagreement as evidence that such principles

History was developed from lectures that Strauss delivered on Spinoza at the New School October 4–16, 1947.

8 Cf. 150 n24.

9 Cf. 79–80.

do change and hence are not by nature. For Strauss, however, the fact of disagreement regarding universal principles does not prove their non-existence. The conventionalist responds that when most people speak of universal principles of justice they are usually simply universalizing their own partial view of justice—most teachers of natural right identify it with the particular conception of justice cherished by their own civilization. In other words, natural rights teachings are mere prejudices, and those who believe in natural right are often quite uncivilized. The principles human beings need in order to live well, the conventionalist continues, are arrived at effortlessly, while it takes great effort to arrive at principles of natural right and the efforts lead to great disagreements. The variation of opinions shows that there is no natural right. Strauss's response is two-fold. First, he concedes that the "just things" may indeed vary, but that does not mean that the *principle* of justice varies. The just is identical with the common good, and what is good for a particular city here and now may admittedly change. Establishing what is just in each case is the work of the political art or skill, which, in turn, is comparable to the skill of the physician. While what is healthy for particular human bodies may vary, the principle of health does not.¹⁰ Second, Strauss argues that the variation or fluctuation regarding natural right can instead prove the effectiveness of natural right. For men do not have serious disagreements over things that are manifestly conventional, such as which side of the road to drive on. Instead the perennial disagreements that arise over the question of natural right reveal a genuine perplexity, a permanent or fundamental problem. The conventionalist is quick to point out that the just is everywhere identified with the legal, and Strauss responds that even this is a kind of agreement: all agree to some degree that justice is bound up with the law, despite the fact that people also regularly speak of unjust laws.

Strauss says that the decision—presumably between conventionalism and natural right—now boils down to the question of law. A tension arises within law itself. Law claims to be something good or noble, and it also presents itself as the common opinion or decision of the city, i.e., of the multitude of citizens. Strauss's account of the law sounds fairly democratic. Is that how Mosaic law presents itself? Or the laws of Lycurgus? At any rate, the law claims to secure the common good, and this is what is meant by "the just." But the conventionalist will deny that there is any such thing as the common good. What is called the common good is in fact nothing other than the good of a part of the political community—the ruling part. Strauss now raises an objection on behalf of natural right, or the common good (he continues to blur important distinctions):

10 Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 11.1106a36–b5.

may there not be a mixed regime? Or, may not the interest of a part of the regime accidentally coincide with the common interest? Disappointingly, Strauss does not tackle these questions. He does not show that a mixed regime is possible nor does he give evidence of a regime where the interest of the ruling class coincides with the common interest. Instead he says that objections of this kind—the kind of objections raised by advocates of classic natural right—presuppose that the city is natural, something the conventionalist rejects. The city is a fiction, according to the conventionalist argument, and it rests, at bottom, on force or violence. The division of the world into cities puts each city in hostile relations with regard to one another, and this arbitrary division of human beings into separate cities is conventional. Cities are akin to gangs of robbers that agree to cooperate to secure their own private advantage over and against other human beings who are by nature indistinguishable from them. And the association that comes about from agreement is conventional. As Strauss reports, "If the city is conventional, the common good is conventional, and therewith it is proved that right or justice is conventional" (105).

In response, Strauss concedes something of the power of this argument and laments the unfortunate similarities that exist between a city and a gang of robbers. Both cities and gangs of robbers have to make use of force and fraud in order to survive, and a city that did not make use of force and fraud would surely not long endure. The city must look first to its own good, to that good which is readily apparent or even naturally good. This is an admission, more or less, that the city simply seeks the collective good of its citizens and is hence a collection of selfish interests.

Conventionalists concede that the city and justice may be useful for the individual, but argue that simply because something is useful or the product of calculation does not prove its naturalness. In fact, conventionalists take the calculated character of the good that the city can supply as evidence that it is not natural. Those things are natural to man that he spontaneously desires or desires for their own sake, not those things he desires instrumentally. After this powerful critique of natural right, Strauss highlights the "nerve" of the conventionalist argument: "right is conventional because right belongs to the city and the city is conventional" (108). Strauss then summarizes the three grounds of conventionalism's rejection of natural right: justice is in tension with everyone's natural desire for his own good; the demands of justice are limited to a conventional unit (the city); and those who speak of "justice" leave unspecified the very terms that would give it any meaning and the variety of notions of justice confirms its conventional character (108).

It appears that the defender of natural right cannot refute this powerful argument. At any rate, after having given a convincing account of the

conventionalist argument Strauss leaves its attack on natural right unrefuted, and shifts gears. Following Plato in reducing the conventionalist argument to hedonism, Strauss turns to an extended analysis of the most developed form of classical hedonism, Epicureanism. What is puzzling is that both Plato and Strauss recognize something of the power of the conventionalist argument, but neither is willing to let it stand. They even seem to indicate the respectability of conventionalism, at least in its highest or most developed form. But for whatever reason, both reject conventionalism because there is something problematic about it. But is it also false?

Both Strauss and Plato turn their sights to a target that is easier to refute: hedonism. Hedonism equates the good with the pleasant, having rejected the pre-philosophic equation of the good with the ancestral. This replacement makes sense insofar as things that were forbidden by ancestral law now come to light as intrinsically and naturally good. If the gods do not support justice by punishing the wicked and rewarding the righteous, prohibitions against the pursuit of bodily pleasure lose their effectiveness. The most obvious, emphatic good is pleasure, or to be more precise, bodily pleasure. The moral or the noble things are unpleasant and require effort. The pleasure that comes from being virtuous or moral or noble comes from external praise. It is a pleasure that arises only as a result of human convention.

Strauss then turns his attention to Lucretius, whose *On the Nature of Things* he calls “the greatest document of philosophic conventionalism and, in fact, its only document available to us that is both authentic and comprehensive” (111–112).¹¹ Strauss’s presentation of Lucretius is not unfavorable. Lucretius recognizes that the best human life is possible only within, or at least at the margins of, highly developed society, but he does not therefore concede that there is something just by nature. Instead, the fact that the best human life, the life of the philosopher, is open only to a few and that these philosophers are not immersed in civic life reveals the gulf between the philosophic life and society. Early society, not highly developed society, was the best and most happy society that ever was, but philosophy is impossible in early society. There is, then, in Lucretius’ view, a disproportion between the requirements of philosophy and the requirements of society—a view with which Strauss would surely agree. This disproportion between philosophy and society comes down to the question of the role of the gods in human affairs. Strauss returns to what he has earlier called *the* fundamental question (74). According to Lucretius, early society, which antedates by far the foundation of cities and which affords great

11 For more extended remarks by Strauss on Lucretius, see “Notes on Lucretius” in Strauss (1995b), 76–139.

satisfaction to its members, is a closed society; the members of this early society believed in the eternity of the world and the protection afforded to them by the "walls of the world" (112). But once trust in the "walls of the world" had come to be shaken by natural catastrophes, men invented the gods, who would guarantee or reinforce the firmness of the walls of the world. While religion may therefore provide comfort for some or even many human beings, it is also responsible for engendering unspeakable evils. The only remedy is in philosophizing, a remedy repulsive to most human beings. Most human beings will live a life mixed with coercion and religion, an unhappy life, since they cannot return to the happy simplicity of early society. Those few human beings who are capable of breaking through the "walls of the world," the philosophers, must remain at society's margins. The section on Lucretius has shown the enormous strength of pre-Socratic philosophy in its highest form, but Strauss nevertheless indirectly points to its deficiency. Pre-Socratic thought takes for granted the eternity of the world's first principles (atoms), or claims without justification that it knows these principles. In addition, while pre-Socratic philosophers saw a need to address the one claim against the rule of natural necessities, i.e., gods, they did so in a reductionist and therefore inadequate way—they reduced all things to atoms (94).¹² To anticipate again, perhaps this is one of the things that will make Socratic political philosophy distinctive—a new approach to theological claims that does not presuppose the existence of eternal imperishable first principles and is not reductionist, insofar as it preserves natural phenomena by recognizing that the nature of a thing is the character of the class of being to which that thing belongs as distinguished from the character of other classes of beings.

Strauss descends from his discussion of Lucretius to "vulgar conventionalism," having only hinted at any theoretical shortcomings of pre-Socratic thought in its most highly developed, authentic, and comprehensive form. Regardless of how respectable or sympathetic his presentation of Lucretius is, Strauss does not let Lucretius' view of the world be the final word in the chapter. Conventionalism, even in its most highly developed form, must remain problematic in some way, because Strauss refuses to let it stand: he abandons "philosophic conventionalism" and again sets his sights on a weaker target. Twice, Strauss has run into powerful conventionalist arguments, and twice he

12 See Miller (1975), 74: "[Pre-Socratic] philosophers had understood by 'nature' those 'first things' out of which and through which all things not of human making have come into being. In reducing things to their elements or originating causes, this approach has lost sight of what it is that makes each class of things distinctive."

has sidestepped the problem by turning to an easier opponent. Perhaps the true problem with conventionalism will appear only in the next chapter.

At any rate, Strauss turns to what he calls “vulgar conventionalism” at this point, and it is clear that he means the sophists, and above all, Protagoras. The sophists taught, rather publicly, the view that the summit of happiness is to combine the appearance of justice with actual injustice. The vulgarization of pre-Socratic philosophy consists precisely in publicizing that view. While the philosophic conventionalist is convinced of the superiority of the philosophic life, the sophist is not. He has some awareness that philosophy or wisdom is high, or even the highest excellence of man, but he is attracted above all to the honor or prestige that attends wisdom. Strauss does not mention here that the sophists were attracted as well to wealth.¹³ The sophist, in order to achieve the honor or prestige attendant on wisdom, has to teach his view that injustice is better than justice. But such a public admission would undermine his attempt to appear just. There is thus a significant tension in the sophist’s view, and the sophist will sooner or later be compelled to conceal or hide his wisdom, and Strauss says that Plato has Protagoras conceal his wisdom by imputing to him his famous myth in the *Protagoras*. The meaning of the myth, once uncovered, amounts to the same exhortation to combine injustice with the appearance of justice.

4 Pre-Socratic Natural Right

Strauss then concludes Chapter Three with a brief remark about pre-Socratic natural right, in particular egalitarian natural right. It is worth noting that Strauss looks to Aristotle and Xenophon for proponents of this view, and finds that neither advances arguments on behalf of egalitarian natural right in his own name. At any rate, egalitarian natural right posits the thesis that man is free and equal by nature. Civil society can be made compatible with man’s natural freedom and equality only if society is based on the consent of free and equal individuals, that is to say, a social contract. Of course, the reader immediately recognizes that this is also the thesis of modern natural right. Strauss encourages the reader to compare and contrast modern and pre-Socratic philosophy. In this penultimate paragraph of the chapter, Strauss points to the fundamental disagreement between pre-Socratic and modern natural right doctrines: modern philosophy abandons nature as the standard. If nature is

13 Cf. Plato *Apology of Socrates* 19d–20a; *Protagoras* 313c–314b, 328b–c; *Euthydemus* 303e–304a.

abandoned, philosophy itself is in danger of being lost as well. By pointing out the fundamental disagreement between modern and pre-Socratic philosophy, Strauss nudges the reader to consider also the similarities that exist between them.

Socrates and his followers rejected an egalitarian, social contract view of natural right. Strauss concludes with one paragraph on Plato's *Crito* because Socrates advances in that dialogue something akin to an egalitarian view of natural right. The *Crito*, Strauss tells the reader briefly, does not contain Socrates' genuine view of the matter. While Socrates may derive his duty of obedience to Athens, an imperfect city, from a tacit contract, he does not derive his duty to the city of the *Republic* from any contract. The reason, Strauss says, is obvious: the city of the *Republic* is the best city, or the city according to nature (119). If the nerve of the conventionalist argument is the denial of the naturalness of the city, it would seem to be a problem for the advocate of natural right that the city of Plato's *Republic* is unlikely ever to come into being.¹⁴

5 Conclusion

Before concluding, I would like to remark on a couple of curiosities in Strauss's manner of proceeding in Chapter Three. In his account of the first grasp of the natural world out of the pre-scientific or pre-philosophic world, Strauss does not strive for historical accuracy and he forgoes extensive anthropological studies that would, he asserts, necessarily be hypothetical (80). His account of the origin of the idea of natural right follows the same principle. Strauss moves freely across historical times and places—but to what effect? First, Strauss treats three subjects rather interchangeably: pre-philosophic life or thought, Greek poetry, and the Bible, effectively subsuming the latter two under the first. He alternates throughout the chapter between speaking of Greek poetry and revealed religion, assimilating the biblical teaching concerning the "way" to the pre-philosophic understanding simply.¹⁵ He never mentions Hesiod by name in *Natural Right and History*, but he quotes from Hesiod's *Theogony* (without attribution, p. 89).¹⁶ And, although he names the Bible (calling it both the Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible), he suppresses any direct references

14 Cf. Strauss (1978), 127.

15 Strauss clearly recognizes differences between Greek poetry and the Bible. See the first part of "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections" in Strauss (1983), 147–166.

16 Hesiod, *Theogony* 116: "At first Chaos came to be."

to it in Chapter Three.¹⁷ Moreover, Strauss, following his usual manner, does not confine his use of the terms “revelation” and “revealed law” to references to the Bible (85).¹⁸ Chapter Three also contains Strauss’s famous contention that the term “nature” is alien to the Hebrew Bible (81)—indeed a conception of “nature” is absent in any pre-philosophic society.¹⁹ Strauss also makes clear that one of the central claims of Hesiod and of the Bible is the same: beings emerge without a cause. The purpose of this approach seems to be to prepare the way to bring Socratic philosophy and the Bible into dialogue, since Socrates was surely sensitive to the kinds of possibilities raised by Greek poetry. After all, “No alternative is more fundamental than this: human guidance or divine guidance” (74). Elsewhere Strauss makes the following remarks:

There is no doubt that the Greek philosophers of the classical period did not know the Bible, and it is, I think, generally admitted that the authors of the Bible did not know the Greek philosophers. But the extraordinary fact is that if one studies both the Greek philosophers and the Bible a little more carefully, one sees that in both sources of Western thought the alternative was, if I may say so, divined.²⁰

Since Greek philosophy and the Bible “divined” one another, each presumably had a response for the other. The Hebrew Bible, for example, implicitly rejects philosophy (81). And Strauss intimates that Socratic philosophy, though ignorant of the Bible, was nonetheless aware of the kind of alternative offered by it. Strauss thus prods the curious reader to search for the Socratic response to this kind of alternative.

17 See 82. Cf. Strauss (1997), 112 for Strauss’s discussion of the biblical phrase “*derekh nashim*.” One should also consider the two epigraphs to *Natural Right and History*.

18 See, e.g., Strauss (1997), 121: “[Socrates] refuses to assent to anything which is not evident to him, and revelation is for him not more than an unevident, unproven possibility.”

19 There is a single reference, however, to Homer. Strauss’s sole reference in *Natural Right and History* to Homer occurs in Chapter Three, where he points to the fact that the term “nature” (*physis*) occurs in the *Odyssey* (p. 90, footnote 10). Strauss thus alludes to the possibility that Homer was a philosopher. Moreover, Strauss describes the discoverer of nature as “some Greek twenty-six hundred years ago *or before*” (82, emphasis mine), and “someone—a traveler, a man who had seen the cities of many men and recognized the diversity of their thoughts and customs” (87), clearly evoking Homer’s Odysseus. See the opening lines of the *Odyssey* as well as X.302–306. For Strauss’s more direct remarks on Homer, see Strauss & Cropsey (1987) 2; also Strauss (1997) 110. Cf. Plato, *Republic*, Book Two, 378d.

20 Strauss (1997), 115.

Next, Strauss's chief representatives of pre-Socratic philosophy are Heraclitus, Epicurus, and Lucretius. Of these three, only Heraclitus is in fact pre-Socratic in the historical sense of the term. Why, then, does Strauss choose two philosophers who lived after Socrates as his chief representatives of pre-Socratic philosophy? Surely this can be explained in part, perhaps in large part, by the fact that we have only scattered fragments from the actual pre-Socratics. It can also be explained by Strauss's claim that Epicurus' strand of conventionalism has exerted great influence over the years. But there is, I think, another reason. By choosing philosophers who came after Socrates as representatives of pre-Socratic conventionalism, Strauss indicates that philosophy is always susceptible of turning into conventionalism. He thus points to the precarious character of natural right, but also of Socratic philosophizing: it is always in danger of being lost and regularly in need of being reestablished due to confusion or extinction.²¹ In his attempt to recover Socratic political philosophy, Strauss indicates that not philosophy, but Socratic or political philosophy is what has been lost in his time and stands in need of recovery.²²

Chapter Three appears to end on an unsatisfactory note: conventionalism, for reasons Strauss does not make entirely clear, is an unacceptable position, yet pre-Socratic philosophy proves incapable of articulating a compelling account of natural right, leaving its existence very much in doubt. On another level, however, the chapter is a success, for Strauss has demonstrated that natural right is a problem, a fundamental and permanent problem.²³ Human beings have a deep and abiding concern for justice. While Strauss has not established that natural right exists in Chapter Three, he has accomplished what the title of the chapter declares its aim to be. He has given an account of the origin of the idea of natural right. The origin of the idea of natural right seems to be rooted in the human desire to defend justice when its existence has been called into doubt by the discovery of nature and the attendant distinction between nature and convention. The chapter thus serves as a kind of prelude to the account of natural right that follows in Chapter Four, "Classic Natural Right."

21 Cf. Alfarabi (2001), *The Attainment of Happiness* §63.

22 "Today, political philosophy is in a state of decay and perhaps putrefaction, if it has not vanished altogether," Strauss (1959), 17. See also Strauss (1995a), 305, where he calls Heidegger, "the only great thinker in our time."

23 "To say natural right is an 'idea'—as Strauss does in the title of Chapter Three and throughout the chapter—"is to say it is a 'fundamental problem.'" Velkley (2011), 15 and the corresponding note 53 on 173.

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Reading Thucydides with Leo Strauss

Clifford Orwin

The place that Leo Strauss occupies among recent commentators on Thucydides is distinctive and contentious.¹ Still, his interpretation of him was by no means *proles sine matre*. Seconding Jacqueline de Romilly, whose work he much admired, he sought to rehabilitate the unity of Thucydides' work. He thus played an important role in establishing what has become the mainstream opinion. Beyond this, he joined her and others in championing the seriousness of Thucydides' thought.² He followed Nietzsche (and his colleague David Grene) in casting Thucydides as a worthy interlocutor of Plato, whose thought, no less than Plato's, was indeed a possession for all time (cf. 1.22.4).³

As most interpreters of Strauss agree, his readings of other writers were guided by a grand theoretical project of his own. Reading him is therefore a complex task. Do we interpret his texts on Thucydides primarily to learn what we can of Strauss and his thought, including the stages of that thought? Or do we read them more with an eye to their utility for interpreting Thucydides?

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1 At this point to expound Strauss' interpretation of Thucydides is not to begin a tradition of commentary but to join it. The most penetrating, but also the most challenging, account is Benardete (1978). Also useful (and far more accessible) are Kleinhaus (2001), Howse (2014), Jaffe (2015), and Keedus (2015). Crucial for understanding Strauss and his attempt to retrieve classical thought as a whole is the relationship of his thought to Heidegger's, on which a large literature now exists, much of it in German, French, and Italian. For a brief introduction see Smith (2006a) 108–130; and, on Strauss' "return to premodern thought" C. Zuckert (2006) or C. and M. Zuckert (2006). Ghibellini (2012) is provocative in its own right and rich in citations of the Continental literature on these issues. Indispensable is Velkley (2011) (on Thucydides, 112 and 197n20).

2 On the history of the reception of Thucydides, see now the remarkable collections of Lee and Morley (2015) and Thauer and Wendt (2015).

3 Grene (1965).

To do justice to both tasks would require a book of its own; someone could do us a favor by writing it. Here I address readers whose first concern is Thucydides.

There are numerous surviving documents of Strauss' concern with Thucydides. They include transcripts of two undergraduate courses, one offered at the University of Chicago in 1962–63 and the other at St. John's College in 1973,⁴ the final year of Strauss' life; an undated and unpublished public lecture preserved in Strauss' archive and published posthumously by Thomas Pangle (Strauss 1989); the long chapter on Thucydides in *The City and Man* (Strauss 1964); and finally "Preliminary Considerations on the Gods in Thucydides' Work" (Strauss 1983) dating from the last year[s] of his life and also published only posthumously. Finally, there are significant discussions of Thucydides scattered through other works of Strauss, to some of which we will refer below.

1 "Thucydides and the Meaning of Political History"

Of these documents the lecture published by Pangle, "Thucydides and the meaning of political history," poses particular problems. Although its manuscript bears no indication of the date of its delivery, Svetozar Minkov has established that Strauss delivered a lecture of this title on December 3, 1952 at the New School in New York.⁵ The lecture thus preceded by a decade Strauss' first course on Thucydides as well as the chapter in *The City and Man*.

It is unclear how much authority to ascribe to this lecture. Strauss never discarded it, but nor did he publish it. He made use of it in the chapter in *The City and Man*, but precisely by so doing rendered the original lecture unpublishable. This later treatment shared some features of the lecture but departed from others. Certain important questions find more extensive discussion in the earlier work, yet we may presume that Strauss regarded the later, briefer treatments as sufficient. We may also question, in the light of Strauss' later

4 I am preparing transcripts of these courses for publication on the web site of the Leo Strauss Center at the University of Chicago. Audiotapes of the St. John's course are already available at <http://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/thucydides-1972-73-st-john%E2%80%99s-college-annapolis>.

5 Minkov, e-mail to the author, September 15, 2014. Also according to Professor Minkov, Strauss had delivered the same lecture or one like it in Chicago in the summer of that year.

writing, whether the view of Thucydides expounded in the lecture is his fully mature one.⁶

The rhetoric of the lecture is complicated and not notably successful; Strauss displays two intentions that prove to be at cross purposes. Addressing the academic controversies of the 1950's, the lecture offers a resounding vindication of political history at the expense of the cultural history that had supplanted it. Strauss maintains that the very turn to cultural history (which implies the authority of historicism) can be understood only politically. Such is the primary sense of his concluding flourish: "History is still primarily political history."

Yet Strauss' other intention in the lecture is to expound an earlier demotion of political history, one at the hands of Socratic philosophy. Casting Thucydides as alike a "political historian" and a "pre-Socratic" who took his cosmic bearings from Heraclitus, he asserts that the emergence of Socrates left him stranded by the wayside in both these capacities.

[As a] quest for understanding of the whole which was not identical with understanding of the parts of the whole . . . pre-Socratic philosophy did not know of a relatively independent understanding of the human things as such. Pre-Socratic philosophy needed, therefore, something like Thucydides' history as its supplement. . . .

Socrates identified the understanding of the whole with understanding of the parts of the whole. Socratic philosophy allowed, therefore, a study of the nature of human things as such. With the emergence of Socratic philosophy, political history in the full Thucydidean sense loses its *raison d'être*. (101–102)

This lecture on the "meaning of political history" thus begins with Thucydides but ends with Plato, a trajectory only barely obscured by its peroration promoting political history.

The City and Man, by contrast, begins with the current intellectual situation, and turns from it first to Aristotle, next to Plato and finally to Thucydides. If the lecture affirms the distinction between political philosophy and political history, the chapter on Thucydides will begin by raising it and end by returning to it, but only to transform it.

6 On this see Pangle in Strauss (1989) xxxi–xxxii. For a different hypothesis on the relationship between the lecture and the chapter, Kleinhaus (2001) 91–92.

2 *The City and Man*, Chapter Three: “On Thucydides’ War of the Athenians and Peloponnesians”

As I’ve said, I write here for those who are primarily readers of Thucydides rather than of Strauss. Without some awareness of Strauss’ project, however, his approach to Thucydides will remain unintelligible. Like the other chapters of *The City and Man*, the discussion of Thucydides responds to its particular context. That context is shaped by the “crisis of the west,” which impels Strauss to “turn with passionate interest, with unqualified willingness to learn toward the political thought of classical antiquity” (1). Here as elsewhere Strauss inverts the historicist view that our reading of the ancients must be guided by the insights owed to modern historical and theoretical progress, with the inevitable implication that in the decisive respects we know better than the ancients did. He suggests that given the problems dogging mature modern thought, we must rather approach the table of the ancients begging bowls in hand, keenly hopeful (if also necessarily skeptical: “the return to classical political philosophy is both necessary and tentative or experimental,” 11) that those great minds will fill them.

The introduction supporting this position (1–12) addresses two crises: the practical one of the Cold War, and the theoretical one of modern “value free” social science. Strauss presents these as complementary. Both follow from the decline of modern political philosophy into two rumps of its former self: prescriptions liberated from the requirements of truth and truth so redefined as incapable of yielding prescriptions. Given the post-Marxist, post-positivist, post-Heideggerian—in a word, although one then yet un-coined, postmodernist—crisis of modern thought, a reconsideration of our situation is urgent. It’s to this end that we must recover the forgotten traces of our journey to our present impasse, and the suppressed pre-modern basis of our modern understanding. “The scientific understanding implies a break . . . with the prescientific understanding, yet at the same time it remains dependent on [that] understanding” (11). Strauss turns to classical political philosophy as the most perfect articulation of the prescientific or “common sense” approach to politics. This quest leads him first to Aristotle and eventually to Thucydides. For the mature Strauss, it seems, any differences between Thucydidean “history” and Socratic “philosophy” are outweighed by their common commonsensicality.

The chapter is divided into ten sections.

2.1 *Political Philosophy and Political History*

In the first two chapters of *The City and Man* Strauss has offered seminal discussions of Aristotle’s *Politics* and Plato’s *Republic*. Following the indications

of Plato himself, however, he suggests that in order fully to grasp the problem of the city and man we must turn from the city at rest to the city in motion, from Plato's city in speech which cannot exist except in speech to actual cities in deed. The chapter thus appears a turning away from philosophy toward history. The philosophers stand above politics, "far away from vulgar clamor" and immune to the charm of politics as actually practiced.

When we open Thucydides' pages, by contrast, we become at once immersed in political life at its most intense, in bloody war both foreign and civil, in life and death struggle. Thucydides sees political life in its own light, he does not transcend it, he presents to us political life in its harsh grandeur, ruggedness and even squalor. (139)

And yet Thucydides, however he immerses us in politics, is not himself simply a political man. "We recognize this difference by calling him, as tradition bids us do, an historian" (140).

Was the supposedly conservative Strauss condemned to do what the tradition bade him? In fact he goes on to argue that however different Plato and Thucydides might prove, "their teachings are not necessarily incompatible; they may supplement one another." This sentence would appear to pose the crucial questions of the chapter within the broader context of the book. Does the possibly mutually supplementary relationship of Thucydides and Plato extend as far as their teachings on the topic of the book? Surely no previous scholar of Thucydides had developed the theme of the "city and man," that is, of the relationship between the city as such and the human individual as such.

Yet no sooner has Strauss begun to explore enticing answers to this question of the possible complementarity of the thinkers than the differences between them again claim center stage. "Whichever way we turn we seem... compelled to fall back on the trite assertion that Thucydides is distinguished from Plato by the fact that he is a historian" (141).

Yet even this, Strauss' second word, while in agreement with his first and seemingly compulsory, proves only provisional. He now proceeds to question just this "trite assertion." Thucydides is not a historian in the contemporary sense, the captive of "scientific" methodologies that privilege the social, economic, or religious over the political. Nor, however, is he one in the Aristotelian sense, who confines himself to stating singulars, leaving it to poetry to present universals. On the contrary, Thucydides "surely lets us see the universal in the individual event which he narrates and through it: it is for this reason that his work is meant to be a possession for all time." Nor, as Strauss notes, does Thucydides ever call himself an historian—the very distinction between

which and a philosopher “presupposes philosophy and we have no right to assume that philosophy is present in Thucydides and for Thucydides.” This is the “decisive reason” why we must abandon thinking of Thucydides as an historian in Aristotle’s sense.

Still, while we “have no right to assume that philosophy is present in . . . and for Thucydides,” he would seem to have anticipated it by his attention to the universal. “If we may use the Aristotelian distinction once more, Thucydides has discovered in the ‘singulars’ . . . the universal. . . . Plato too can be said to have discovered in a single event—in the singular life of Socrates—the universal . . .” (143) So much for clarifying the difference between them by “falling back on the trite assertion that [Thucydides] is an historian.”

Thus at a loss, Strauss seeks the guidance of a superior mind. He turns to Hobbes, Thucydides’ greatest modern reader. Hobbes too discusses the difference between the philosopher and the historian, but differently than Aristotle had. The general isn’t absent from history, quite the contrary; but the historian, unlike the philosopher, conveys it only in the garb of particulars. “The narrative doth secretly instruct the reader, and more effectually than can possibly be done by precept.” “The historian presents the universal silently” (Strauss); “the reader must draw it out for himself” (144).

Yet Strauss now diverges from Hobbes. “If Thucydides is as reticent as Hobbes’s . . . remarks may induce us to think, it seems well-nigh impossible to establish [his] teaching with any degree of certainty.” But no. “After one has recovered from one’s first impression, one is amazed to see how many and how important judgments Thucydides makes explicitly, in his own name. These judgments form the only legitimate starting point for the understanding of his teaching” (145).

The “first impression” from which we must recover is that encouraged by Hobbes. Hobbes exaggerates Thucydides’ indirectness and therefore his opacity. Having himself grouped Thucydides with Plato for their practice of presenting the universal through the particular, Strauss declares our only legitimate starting point to be one without counterpart in Plato: explicit judgments in the author’s own name. This passage underlines what Strauss is so often misunderstood as not having said, or as having said the opposite of, but which he in fact says so often: the first rule of good reading is to begin from the most obvious.

2.2 *The Case for Sparta: Moderation and the Divine Law*

Strauss duly begins with “Thucydides’ first explicit judgment,” that “the [Peloponnesian] war was greater than the earlier wars.” It is to establish this that Thucydides sets out to demonstrate the “weakness of the ancients.”

This would seem an “Athenian” strain in Thucydides’ work, Athens being the city of progress. Yet in fact Strauss titles this section “The Case for Sparta: Moderation and the Divine Law.” He contrives that the case for Sparta, by Thucydides’ day the least progressive of cities, be made before the case for Athens. True, the first place need not be the place of honor (2.36.1–3). Still, Strauss’ choice remains significant—not least in reminding us that Sparta too (and Sparta perhaps not least or even most) is both the seat and the result of progress beyond the weakness of the ancients. For what Thucydides presents as the most decisive stage of progress from the “weakness of the ancients”—the emergence among those who now call themselves Hellenes of the virtues that distinguish them from barbarians—was much more the work of Sparta than of Athens (1.5–6). Nor would Athens ever achieve the greatest of the distinctions of Sparta: its ability to combine prosperity with moderation. “Thucydides’ taste is the same as that of Plato and Aristotle” (146).

Yet Strauss concedes that we still require unambiguous evidence that Thucydides preferred Spartan moderation to Athenian cleverness and innovation. He finds that proof in the most searing passage in the work, the treatment of civil strife or *stasis*. “Moderation, justice, and piety belong together; their enemy calls itself daring and shrewdness or intelligence.” Since the former are at home in peace and the latter in war, Strauss upsets conventional expectations by associating Sparta with peace and Athens with war. He concludes that although Athens was superior to Sparta at war and Sparta’s moderation a handicap at it, “[the] superiority [of moderation] to its opposite will not become doubtful” (147).

A little further on we encounter another of Strauss’ reversals. “If we take into consideration the connection between moderation, gentleness, justice and the divine law, we understand not only [Thucydides’] admiration for the Spartan manner, but above all his humanity. . . .” Strauss has earlier mentioned the question of Thucydides’ humanity, which no less outstanding [a] scholar than Reinhardt had presented as enigmatic (145). Strauss succeeds in making sense of it by integrating it with Thucydides’ comprehensive outlook. As modern liberals we may well be surprised that Strauss associates this humanity with Thucydides’ admiration for Sparta. Yet if Sparta excels in this regard it is not by any “humanitarian” reluctance to inflict suffering on others. It is by shielding its own citizens from evil through the superior stability of its regime. Thucydides’ humanity seconds his “realistic” appreciation of a regime that can be counted on to protect its own.⁷

7 In a highly original treatment of this chapter, Howse (2014), 133–48 argues that Strauss’ humanity, inspired by his reading of Thucydides, supported his lifelong commitment to the rule of law in international affairs.

‘By starting from the most comprehensive statements made by Thucydides himself we arrive at the conclusion that this great Athenian preferred the Spartan manner to the Athenian manner’ (150). This supports “our first impression according to which Thucydides’ horizon is the horizon of the city.” Sparta is superior to Athens precisely as a city or from the city’s point of view. Yet Strauss promptly complicates matters by suggesting that what defines the perspective of the city (“if it is healthy”) is precisely that it is not self-sufficient but looks to what is higher than itself, the divine law. “The city must transcend itself”(153).

This fundamental orientation of the *polis* toward the transpolitical explains Thucydides’ studied indifference to the subpolitical, so unintelligible to modern scientific historians (153–54). Yet this orientation would be unproblematic (and simply favorable to Sparta) only if the character of the transcendent were so. Now Strauss abruptly places this in doubt. In finding unequivocally in favor of Sparta and the divine law, “we have drawn [a] general conclusion . . . from Thucydides’ statements [that] clearly goes beyond those statements” (154).

2.3 *The Case for Athens: Daring, Progress, and the Arts*

“The first subject of our reconsideration must be Thucydides’ initial judgment according to which the Peloponnesian war was greater than the earlier wars” “The greatness of the war” now emerges as not just one of Thucydides’ claims but his principal one, if we understand it properly.

“The Peloponnesian war is that singular event which reveals fully, in an unsurpassable manner, for all times, the nature of war.” On this contention depends Thucydides’ further one for the superior and perpetual utility of his work. It faces, however, an obvious objection. “Thucydides was compelled to prove the supremacy of the Peloponnesian war . . . because men believed in [that] of the Trojan war.” “Thucydides confronts us with the choice between Homeric and Thucydidean wisdom” (157–58).

We must therefore relocate Thucydides with respect to Athens and Sparta. “However highly [he] may have thought of Sparta, moderation, and the divine law, his thought belongs entirely to innovating Athens . . .” (159). His praise of ancient ways is itself innovative; his appreciation of the tradition rests on untraditional grounds. The crucial theoretical step is that from the divine law to nature (159–61). Knowledge of the first or oldest things—the subject of the first 23 chapters of the work, which tradition dubs the *Archaiologia* or “account of the beginnings”—includes knowledge of “the things which are at all times, and it is with things of this kind that the possession for all times is concerned.”

Properly understood, the crucial dualities of Thucydides’ work—Greek and barbarian, war and peace, rest and motion—are aspects of his teaching on nature. While Greek and barbarian and war and peace articulate

the parameters of human nature, rest and motion pervade nature as such (159–61). As such they succeed and subsume the divine (160–61). If “the divine law properly understood is the interplay of motion and rest, [then] one must study [Thucydides’] work in the light of the question of how that divine law is related to the divine law in the ordinary sense.”

In thus questioning the authority of the divine as usually understood “Thucydides belongs in a sense to Periclean Athens.” The Funeral Oration, that supreme display of Athens at her Sunday best, is unabashedly progressive and quite remarkably godless. We cannot then simply identify Spartan reverence for antiquity with “the view of the city as city.” “The city thinks differently at different times” (162). “. . . The admiration for antiquity . . . is at home in peace whereas men tend to regard every [present] war as the greatest.” Yet Thucydides by exposing the weakness of the ancients establishes the second of these views as well founded in the case at hand.

Strauss presents Thucydides’ awareness of the weakness of the ancients as arising from his experience of the war itself: “war is a violent teacher [cf. 3.82.3] . . . also of Thucydides himself.” This implies further reflection on Thucydides’ “methodology.”

Taught by that teacher Thucydides presents the war as it unfolds. Generally speaking, he lets us see the war at each point as it could be seen at the time; he shows us the war from different viewpoints.

Strauss here addresses a problem common to all interpreters of Thucydides. Having bid us be guided by Thucydides’ explicit judgments, he has admitted that these statements appear to contradict one another.⁸ Unlike so many earlier interpreters, however—especially those writing in the German tradition of the *Thukydidesfrage* or “Thucydides problem”—Strauss refuses to account for them by ascribing them to different stages of Thucydides’ composition of the work. “We rather have in mind that deliberate movement of his thought between two different points of view which expresses itself in the deliberate dual treatment of the same subject from different points of view . . .” (162). Thucydides resembles Plato in that we must strive to understand his contradictions “dialectically,” as necessary means of conveying a complex but consistent understanding.⁹

8 Kleinhaus (2001), 74: “Strauss’ explicit-judgment approach fails to yield a conclusion because Thucydides’ surface teaching is contradictory.”

9 Here Strauss strikingly anticipates the influential “postmodernist” reading of Thucydides by Connor (1984); evidently there are issues of hermeneutics where pre-modern and postmodern meet.

Readers familiar with Strauss will have come to expect this approach to any writer he deems first-rate. We are to demand the most of Thucydides, holding him to the lofty standard implied by his casting of his work as a *ktema es aien* (possession for all time). No feature of his work will qualify as an imperfection unless it defies all reasonable efforts to vindicate it as a perfection.¹⁰ In the next section Strauss will confront a stern test of this principle.

2.4 *The Speeches of the Actors and the Speech of Thucydides*

All commentators must face the vexing question of the relationship of the marvelous speeches sprinkled through the work to Thucydides' own speech or teaching. Do the speeches express the author's views or those of the speakers only? Strauss has already declared the speeches only a special case of Thucydides' brandishing of multiple (and therefore partial) perspectives on the war (163).

Thucydides' own statement on the speeches (1.22.1) is a notorious stumbling block. "The only thing which seems to emerge with sufficient clarity about the speeches is that what 'seemed' to Thucydides is more present in the speeches than in his account of the deeds." Throughout his treatment of the speeches Strauss stresses the primacy of deeds (*erga*) for Thucydides, and the subordination of the speeches to the task of interpreting the deeds. Strauss both takes the speeches more seriously than most commentators and regards them as more radically problematic: these two things go together.

Strauss interprets the speeches as special cases of Thucydidean "perspectivism." Each speaker confronts a particular case which (like all cases) presents general issues; at the same time the particularities of the case shape the speaker's treatment of those issues. The speeches remain doubly partial: "they deal with a particular situation . . . and they are spoken from the point of view of one or the other side . . ." (166). Thucydides' own speech—his narrative—is impartial in both these senses. "By integrating the political speeches into the true and comprehensive speech, he makes visible the fundamental difference between the political speech and the true speech" (166).

Yet Thucydides also finds ways of communicating directly with the reader by means of the speeches.

...The first speech occurring in the work opens with "Just (Right)," and the second speech, . . . a reply to the first, opens with "Necessary

10 Cf. Kleinhaus (2001), 80–81, who ascribes to Strauss "an interpretive choice that is partly made on the basis of hope." Yet this hope is not dogmatic but provisional and experimental: the interpretation of the text that vindicates the author's consistency must also convince as the most plausible one.

(Compulsory).” The thought indicated by these two opening words taken together, the question of the relation of right and necessity . . . is Thucydides’ thought. This thought so unobtrusively . . . indicated illumines everything which preceded the two speeches and everything which follows them. These two . . . words indicate the point of view from which Thucydides looks at the Peloponnesian war. (174)

Similarly this paragraph illumines all that precedes and follows in Strauss’ essay by indicating the point of view informed by Thucydides from which he looks at Thucydides. The sections of the essay that follow, duly titled *Dikē* and *Anankē*, are its central ones (5 and 6 of 10) and by all indications its core.

2.5 *Dikē*

“How does the Peloponnesian war come to sight in the light of the distinction between right and compulsion” (174)? This question plunges us into Thucydides’ complex treatment of the causes of the war. A certain compulsion (that exerted on the Spartans by the rising greatness of the Athenian empire) was the “truest cause” of the war, although the least mentioned one; of the avowed causes (Corcyra, Potidea, etc.) some participated in the first, as the latest episodes in Athens’s ascent. “The avowed cause . . . which is inferior in truth to the unavowed cause” was the breach of the thirty-year treaty between the Athenian and Spartan alliances. In this matter, so it appears, considerations of compulsion prevailed over those of right.

Not surprisingly, the belligerents themselves assigned priority to the “avowed cause” or the question of right. They accused each other of having been the first to break the treaty. Thucydides, “the best judge for whom one could wish” (175), refrains from pronouncing on the matter. Only much later, in his account of the tenth year of the war, does “he pronounce unequivocally in his own name” that the war had begun with the Spartan invasion of Attica (5.20.1), “thus implying that it was Sparta which had broken the treaty” (176). “He conceals for as long as possible that it was Sparta which had violated right” (177). “The strange character of his treatment of Spartan guilt in the first part of the war becomes still more visible when one contrasts it with his treatment of Athenian guilt in the second part: in the latter case he has no hesitation whatever in stating his own judgment without any ambiguity whatever” (177). Strauss continues by noting that the “treaties were solemnly sworn; their breach was a violation of divine law.” “Thus the question of who started the war is linked to the question concerning the divine law.” Thucydides thus defers to Spartan sensibilities twice over: first by respecting her reluctance to acknowledge her responsibility for breaking the treaty, and second by adopting her concern

with the “avowed cause” which raises the question of divine law. He implies that the outcomes of both halves of the war might have resulted from divine enforcement of sacred law (177–78).

“While the gods’ concern with oaths may [thus] be said to have been vindicated,” Strauss readily admits that “for Thucydides it was apparently a question whether the connection [between injustice and defeat] was more than a coincidence.”

All the more striking then is Strauss’ continued emphasis in the pages that follow (178–80) not only on *dikē* but on the divine in the sense of sacred restraint. The two converge in the case of treaties; Strauss dwells on purely human reasons why treaties and therefore confidence in the efficacy of oaths (and therefore in divine enforcement of them) are of the utmost importance to political life. The requirements of reason and those of piety are by no means simply in tension: the latter may support the former.

Strauss returns to the issue of the causes of the war. The truest cause of the war (the Spartans’ fear of the rise in Athenian greatness) being little avowable by them, and the most avowed one (Athens’s alleged violation of the treaty) being rather weak, the Spartans resorted to sacred complaints to buttress their merely political ones. Strauss stresses that Thucydides articulates the former in much greater detail than the latter, which is “all the more remarkable since one of the political arguments—that which dealt with the Athenian degree regarding Megara—appears to have been of much greater importance than any other cause except the truest” (179). “One sees again how much Thucydides’ primary point of view is Spartan” (*ibid.*).

Strauss’ section on *dikē* ends with a long discussion that makes no mention of that subject (180–82). Returning to the questions of the causes of the war, he leaves it to the reader to recall the connection between this issue and that of right (174–75).

Strauss begins this passage by dividing Book One into five parts, each treating a specific theme and covering a particular epoch. He notes both that “the transitions from I to II, from II to III, and from IV to V are returns from later events to earlier ones,” and that “Thucydides turns from the openly avowed causes which are later in time and less true to the truest and least avowed cause which is first in time.”

From this fact taken by itself we are led to expect that the archeology which begins at the beginning is meant to bring to light the simply first cause or causes (as distinguished from the first cause of the Peloponnesian war) which as such are the simply true and simply “unspoken” or immanifest causes. This expectation is confirmed by the study of the archeology. (181)

Strauss does not elaborate on this “simply first cause or causes.” (Might he mean the interplay of motion and rest? [Cf. 159–61.]) Instead he concludes this section of the chapter by turning to re-examine the third and central section of the book, that dealing with the “truest cause” of the war, the rising greatness of Athens. He now suggests that in fact Thucydides steps back from this or any other account of the truest cause. “He [thus] indicates the gravity of the question regarding the true causes . . .”

In what does the gravity of this question consist? Presumably in its bearing on *dikē*, the indicated subject of the present section. The question of the “truest cause” is inseparable from that of the combatants’ opposing claims of right. Thucydides steps back from the issue of causes in deference to the delicacy of that of justice.

2.6 Anankē

Strauss’ treatment of *anankē* continues his exploration of *dikē*. He begins by denying that for Thucydides either “right belongs to the sphere of mere seeming and compulsion to [that] of being” or “right and compulsion are simply opposites.” On the contrary compulsion intrudes upon justice. “Compulsion excuses: it justifies an act which in itself would be unjust”—such as Sparta’s putative breach of the Thirty Years Treaty under the compulsion of her fear of the rising power of Athens. Does war guilt then attach to the Athenians? “Yet partly the Athenians themselves and partly Thucydides through his narrative show that Athens was herself compelled to increase her power [from fear of the Persians and of the Spartans] . . . ; she was compelled to compel Sparta to wage war against her.” The very same argument that exculpates one also exculpates the other.

Yet “the Athenians go considerably further.” Among the compulsions that by ruling them require them to rule others they include not only fear but also honor and interest (1.75.3). This is a step of staggering boldness. “If being induced by honor . . . and especially by interest is regarded as compulsory . . . then it is hard to see how . . . any acquisition . . . of tyrannical rule by one city over others can ever be unjust” (183). Empire as such always comes fully justified. But if this thesis seems novel and shocking, the Athenians defend it as an inference from established practice: stronger cities have always kept down weaker ones.

Rather than contest this claim, Strauss reflects on its implications.

Even if according to the instruction silently conveyed by Thucydides’ narrative all cities which have the required power act in accordance with the Athenians’ thesis regarding the compulsory power of interest, it would perhaps not necessarily follow that they are in fact compelled

to act in this manner. This issue is decided in the dialogue between the Athenians and the Melians.

How is it decided? The dialogue might seem to resolve this issue in favor of the Athenians. For as Strauss shows conclusively, they prevail in every round of it. Besides which the Melians are compelled to agree, however reluctantly, that the only relevant issue is the respective interests of the two cities. (They thereby implicitly concede that interest, unlike other concerns, is compulsory.) Nor can they refute two further crucial claims of the envoys: that the interest of the Athenians requires them to subdue Melos, and that the interest of the Melians lies in the survival of their city. "[The Melians] ... thus agree that the issue is not whether one should act nobly or basely but whether there is ground of hope for [them]" (186). The Athenians proceed to show that there is not.

Yet rather than persuading the Melians, the efforts of the Athenians founder utterly on the Melians' confidence in assistance from the gods ("being blameless men facing those who are unjust") and from their kinsmen the Spartans. Despite the attempts of the Athenians to school them, the Melians hold fast to their delusive hopes. From this arises the frustration of the envoys (5.111–113) and the eventual ruin of the Melians (5.113–116). At the very least we must tax the Athenians with a failure to appreciate the power of such hopes: they fall prey to their own facile rationalism.

"If this action of the Melians was foolish, one must wonder whether this throws any light on the most striking reason of their action, i.e. their view that the gods help the just or harm the unjust" (189).

Taking the question of right entirely by itself, i.e. disregarding the gods altogether, one may say that there is a kinship between injustice and motion and between justice and rest, but that just as rest presupposes motion and issues in motion, justice presupposes injustice and issues in injustice. It is precisely for this reason that human beings seek support for right in the gods or that the question of right cannot be considered entirely apart from the question concerning the gods.

Strauss thus links Thucydides' concern with the question of the gods with that interplay of rest and motion which Strauss has earlier conjectured was the "divine law properly understood." Having posed "the question of how the divine law is related to the divine law in the ordinary understanding," Strauss has now answered that question. Paradoxically, "taking the question of right entirely by itself, disregarding the gods altogether" yields the conclusion that

“this question cannot be considered entirely apart from the question concerning the gods.” That, it seems to me, is Strauss’ Thucydides in a nutshell. The permanent weakness of justice by nature explains the inseparability of the issue of justice from that of the divine.

Strauss concludes by repeating that “Thucydides just as his Athenians on Melos did not know of a strong city which failed to rule a weak city when it was to the former’s interest to do so, merely for reasons of moderation, i.e. independently of calculation.” Yet he has earlier denied that this sufficed to establish the power of interest as compulsory (184), while promising that the Melian Dialogue would decide this issue. He doesn’t appear to have explained how it has done so.

2.7 *The Dialogue on Melos and the Disaster in Sicily*

In this, by far the longest section of his commentary, Strauss partially affirms the old chestnut that the Athenian disaster in Sicily in some sense follows from the dialogue on Melos. He departs from his predecessors—even shockingly—by his reinterpretation of this claim. Both dialogue and disaster are commonly said to evince the “decline of Athens.” Both are censured for departing from those good old Periclean ways, the Dialogue by its cynicism and the Sicilian expedition by its recklessness.

Strauss makes short work of these views. However differently than the envoys Pericles might have spoken, “his political principle did not differ from” theirs (192). As for the expedition, Pericles might not have approved of it, but Thucydides “regarded [it] as perfectly feasible” (ibid.). The venture failed because of the “fundamental defect of post-Periclean . . . domestic politics,” the “overriding concern with private interest which ruined the Sicilian expedition and ultimately caused the loss of the war” (193). Properly stated, then, the question is the relationship between the Melian dialogue and this emancipation of the private from the public.

“The . . . dialogue,” Strauss avers, “shows nothing of such an emancipation.” “But it contains the most unabashed denial occurring in Thucydides’ work of a divine law which . . . moderates the city’s desire for ‘having more’” (193). This leads Strauss to reflect not on a falling away from the already godless Pericles but on Pericles’ own principles as implying the subsequent disintegration of Athens.

Can one encourage, as even Pericles and precisely Pericles does, the city’s desire for “having more” than other cities without in the long run encouraging the individual’s desire for “having more” than his fellow citizens? . . . [Pericles] did not realize that the unjust understanding of

the common good is bound to undermine dedication to the common good however understood. (193–194)

The apparent incarnation of the problem of post-Periclean politics at Athens is Alcibiades. It is he who first openly applies the “Athenian thesis” to domestic politics by casting it as a realm in which each citizen is indeed concerned with “having more” than his fellows—and who openly promotes himself, Alcibiades, as the one who deserves the most, since the satisfaction of the selfish desires of the others depends on his vastly superior capacities (6.16). Yet Strauss aims not to inculcate Alcibiades but to vindicate him. Not Alcibiades but the pious Nicias, the foremost opponent of the expedition as Alcibiades had been its foremost champion, furnishes Strauss’ example of that ascendancy of the private that ruined the venture (197–98). Therefore “the conduct of Alcibiades appears in another light than it otherwise would” (199). Strauss vindicates those claims to superiority that Alcibiades’ rivals joined the *demos* in finding so offensive. An expedition like the Sicilian one, so much greater than any Pericles would have undertaken, required a leader whose nature was superior to his. Alcibiades was that leader (199–200). In the end, moreover, “Alcibiades was driven to prefer his private good [to that of Athens only] because the Athenian *demos* [by recalling him with the intention of executing him at the instigation of his rivals] compelled him to become a traitor . . . ; the Sicilian expedition would have succeeded if the . . . *demos* had trusted Alcibiades” (199).

Once Strauss has repudiated the conventional wisdom on Alcibiades, Nicias takes center stage for the rest of the discussion of the failure of the expedition. What is the relation between the Melian dialogue and the Sicilian disaster? Not that the Athenians were guilty of further hubristic overreach for which they were duly chastened. Rather that they withdrew their trust from Alcibiades (who may be confidently presumed to have followed Pericles in thinking along the same lines as the envoys) and placed their fate in the hands of the most “Melian” of their leaders.

Strauss expounds at considerable length the character of Nicias (200–209). His treatment, mirroring Thucydides’ presentation, is both deeply sympathetic and highly critical. Nicias emerges as Thucydides’ most important character, the one from whose failure we learn the most. Chronically unable to discern the tension between his particular interest and that of the city, he supposes that whatever will best serve him will also best serve the city. As the “Spartan” or “Melian” among the Athenians, he combines deep piety with a reluctance to tempt the gods by daring. Yet by sowing suspicion of Alcibiades in a vain attempt to avert the Sicilian expedition, he paves the way for his rival’s eventual recall. This will leave him the primary commander of this venture

that he so opposed and to the audacity of which he is so unsuited. He is responsible for the immense size of the expedition, wrongly supposing that there will be safety in numbers. And it is he who prevents the expedition from withdrawing when withdrawal is still feasible, for reasons so flimsy that they baffle (and so paralyze) his fellow generals (7.47–49).

Nicias thus displays a seemingly incoherent blend of timidity and fecklessness. According to Strauss this is intelligible only in the light of his ultimate reliance on the divine. He cannot permit himself to believe that the abyss will engulf someone so blameless as he, or that the gods will not pity the Athenians in their now desperate straits (7.77).

Nicias, and the Athenians in Sicily with him, perished in the last analysis for the same reason that the Melians perished. This then is the connection between the Melian dialogue and the Sicilian disaster . . . : not indeed the gods, but the human concern with the gods without which there cannot be a free city, took terrible revenge on the Athenians. . . . Alcibiades, who might have said what the Athenians on Melos say, might have brought the . . . expedition to a happy issue. But Alcibiades' proved or presumed impiety made it necessary for the Athenian *demos* to entrust the expedition to a man of Melian beliefs whom they could perfectly trust because he surpassed every one of them in piety. (209)

2.8 *The Spartan Manner and the Athenian Manner*

In Section 8 Strauss returns in a manner to the subjects of Sections 2 and 3. As we would expect he expounds the Spartan manner before turning to the Athenian one. He begins by reaffirming the truth of the Athenian thesis only to complain nonetheless that given its subversion of domestic trust the thesis “does not do justice to the truth intended by the ‘Spartan’ praise of moderation and the divine law” (209). He further qualifies his affirmation of the thesis by noting that “the meaning of compulsion is not quite clear: the Melians were not compelled to submit to the Athenians.” “The very least one would have to say is that there are different kinds of compulsion” (*ibid.*). Not all compulsions are strictly or clearly such; not all alleged compulsions are strictly and clearly necessary. At 7.57–58 Thucydides classifies the combatants on both sides of the Sicilian struggle according to whether their participation was willing or compelled. Speaking now in his own name, he employs an understanding of compulsion that while somewhat broader than the Spartan one remains much less so than that preached by his Athenians.

This isn't the only reason to hesitate to understand the conduct of the Athenians themselves primarily in terms of the thesis. For whatever its truth the thesis explains at most what Athens has in common with other cities, not what distinguishes her from them. That distinction is a certain nobility or magnanimity. When the Athenians act most shockingly (as when butchering the Melians) it is by betraying that magnanimity. Of Thucydides' characters only Pericles does justice to the higher side of Athens, not her supposed thralldom to compulsion but her free dedication to the pursuit of immortal glory.

If, then, we consider the actions of Athens and Sparta as cities, i.e., their actions toward other cities, the superiority of the Athenians in both intelligence and mildness, to say nothing of noble daring and devotion to the public good, is manifest (214–17, 219–21).

Yet there is surely a kind of Athenian atrocity which has no parallel in Sparta: the Athenians' savage rage against each other after the mutilation of the Hermae. . . . Consider[ing] this action in the context of the Athenians' treatment of their leading citizens in general, one becomes inclined again to say that Sparta was a better city. . . . (217)

It is characteristic of Strauss' treatment of Sparta that the feat he presents as vindicating her is one of omission.

Strauss goes on to argue that the Athenian manner reveals itself as tragic, the Spartan one as comic. That Sparta is comic emerges above all from her greatest triumph in the pages of the work, her victory at Mantinea over the combined forces of Athens and Argos (222–225). While completely restoring the reputation she had lost by her surrender at Pylos, this triumph "reveals at the same time most clearly and specifically Spartan ineptness." For this reason "Sparta's victory [in the broader war] is of interest only as the reverse side of Athens' defeat" (226).

"The dialogue on Melos separates the Spartan comedy (i.e. the victory at Mantinea) from the Athenian tragedy." Tragedy suggests punishment for *hybris*, but Strauss sees the flaw of the Athenians as consisting precisely in their nobility. "The Sicilian expedition, or rather its cause . . . is a kind of grave sickness but a noble sickness." That sickness is the politicization of *eros* evoked by Pericles in the Funeral Oration: "it was the community of lovers of the city who desired to adore their beloved with the jewel Sicily." "If the highest *eros* is that for the city and if the city reaches its peak in an *eros* like that of Athens for Sicily, *eros* is of necessity tragic or, as Plato seems to suggest, the city is the tragedy *par excellence*." (225–226)

This is the most moving passage of the chapter, which brilliantly captures the power of the Sicilian narrative. Thucydides conveys something to which his Athenians have failed to rise, a tragic perspective on their thesis and therefore themselves. The “compulsions” or “greatest things” to which the Athenians ascribe their empire are not in themselves tragic; indeed they may even seem tawdry. They become tragic only when infused with *eros* and yoked thereby to that magnanimous devotion to the city that the Athenians pride themselves on practicing freely. The crucial compulsion bearing on the Athenians is therefore the ambiguous one of *eros*. Yet note the *if* and *seems* in Strauss’ final sentence. The tragic interpretation of the work, however necessary, proves insufficient. It is too good to be true, i.e. too “poetic” to be true (226–27).¹¹

2.9 *The Questionable Universalism of the City*

Even leaving aside other necessary qualifications, politics (and life) would be simply tragic only if there were no life beyond politics. Strauss has stressed the primacy of the political over the sub-political for Thucydides, this against “scientific” history. Yet there remains the question of the trans-political. The trans-political as the pre-philosophic city grasps it—the divine law—has disclosed itself as only doubtfully so, that is, as a questionable object of reverence. Pericles’ brilliant innovation had been to deify the city itself, by creating a vision of it in its perfection as an object of *eros* that rendered superfluous the divine as an object of reverence. In the imagination of the Athenians as fired by Pericles, “the present splendor of Athens gives rise to . . . universal renown, [and these] vouch for her everlasting and universal fame in the future.” This vision, which “calls for boundless striving for evermore, is wholly incompatible with moderation” (228).

“It is . . . not altogether misleading to say that for Thucydides the pious understanding . . . is true if for the wrong reasons; not the gods but nature sets limits to what the city can attempt” (229). Yet on closer scrutiny an even deeper gulf appears between Thucydides and all political men, for they, those preoccupied with maintaining no less than those bent on acquiring (i.e., Spartans or Melians no less than Athenians), equally evince a hopeful disregard of the natural limits of political life. All are in this crucial sense “pious.” “There is something reminding of religion in Athenian imperialism” (*ibid.*).

11 For other statements underscoring the tragic character of Thucydides’ work, see Strauss (1958) 292 and (1959) 260; cf. also 1989 (100–101). In retrospect these appear defective, however, lacking as they do the significant reservation attending Strauss’ formulation here.

By this time it should be obvious that Strauss' Thucydides is not a "conservative." He suggests no way back to Spartan or Melian (or Nician) piety. He offers not retreat from the path of Athens but rather persistence to its end. Where it ends, however, is in a universalism quite different from that of Pericles, that of Thucydides himself. Not Periclean imperialism but Thucydides' soaring yet unflinching thought is the true perfection of Athenian daring. The quest for understanding of nature, which is everywhere and always, replaces the noble delusion of the universal city.

Thucydides, then, was not less "Athenian" than his Pericles or Alcibiades, but even more so. This provides an intriguing twist to Strauss' theme of "the city and man." The ultimate basis of Thucydides' (and the discerning reader's) attachment to the Athenian regime is that it, more than any other, conduces to full human excellence through full self-understanding.¹² In Thucydides' own presentation, as Strauss reads it, he and his project had depended decisively on Athens. There is thus in Thucydides a certain anticipation of Hegel, with Athens playing the absolute moment.

This may puzzle the attentive reader. Isn't Strauss' project in *The City and Man* to question historicism? Yes—but this articulation of Thucydides' relationship to Athens is not historicist. What Athens had unwittingly offered Thucydides was a hand up in transcending Athens. Strauss now proceeds to develop the premise that "one is led to the deepest stratum of Thucydides' thought" when one considers the profound tension between his explicit praise of Sparta ("which is not matched by a praise of Athens") and his teaching of the weakness of the ancients ("which implies . . . the praise of innovating Athens"). "Thucydides does not unqualifiedly identify himself with 'Athens'" (231–36).

This "deepest stratum" of Thucydides' thought finds expression above all in the lone speech he ascribes to Diodotus (3.42–48). Strauss' account of that speech (231–35) defies recapitulation here. As he reads it, however, it implies a qualification of Thucydides' progressivism that accounts for his muted sympathy for Sparta.

The belief that man is at the peak now is . . . therefore in need of . . . revision. The difference between the wise and the unwise . . . is not affected by the progress of the arts or of the laws. . . . The belief in progress must be qualified with a view to the fact that human nature does not change. (235; cf. 235–36)

12 On the significance of this passage for understanding Strauss' conception of philosophy see Ghibellini (2012) 45–46.

Only on this presumption of the limits to progress posed by the immutability of human nature can Thucydides claim to make progress in the decisive respect in which it remains possible: progress in understanding the permanent limits of political life.

2.10 *Political History and Political Philosophy*

Strauss comes full circle by reversing the order of the elements in the heading of Section One. If his task in taking leave of Plato so long ago was to lead us from philosophy to history, he now must circle back to the former. Whereas Strauss' lecture of ten years before had stressed the gulf between Thucydides and Plato—between political history (conceived as an adjunct of Pre-Socratic cosmology) and political philosophy—Strauss begins this section by reiterating their compatibility and agreement. Yet his new position implies that history, remaining at the level of the particular (e.g. of the best Athenian regime in the lifetime of Thucydides, 8.97.2) must defer to philosophy and its quest for the best regime simply. "... This amounts to saying that Thucydides' thought is inferior to Plato's thought."

"Or could Thucydides have had a positive reason for stopping on his ascent earlier than Plato?" After briefly canvassing the seeming differences between Plato and Thucydides on what might be possible for cities (i.e., on the degree to which their regimes are determined by choice rather than by fatality) Strauss concludes "that there is no fundamental difference ... between the two thinkers" (238). Plato too recognized that not wisdom but chance legislates. The two are therefore in agreement that "there is something in the nature of the city which prevents it from rising to the height to which a man may rise" (ibid.)

It is then (speaking anachronistically) with a kind of Platonic warrant that Thucydides presents an actual world of quarreling unequal cities that are neither self-sufficient nor part of a just international order. For such cities except when they are on the verge of civil war the most important questions concern their relations with other cities. "Thucydides does not rise to the heights of classical political philosophy because he is more concerned than [it] with what is 'first for us' as distinguished from what is 'first by nature'" (240). Philosophy, which is the ascent from the former to the latter, requires that we start "from seeing the city as a world, as the highest in the world; it must start from seeing man as completely immersed in political life."

Political philosophy thus presupposes but does not exhibit what Thucydides articulates "in an unsurpassable, nay unrivalled manner." Political history is in a sense lower than political philosophy, mired as it is in those constraints and conventions from which philosophy aspires to emerge. It is also, however, at least as (and even if only as) practiced by Thucydides, prior to and necessary

for it. As the earlier chapters of *The City and Man* have established, ascent from the city is possible only via the opinions the city supplies: it is only through examination of what is “first for us” that what is “first by nature” may emerge. The “pre-scientific” approach to philosophy (if by that we mean the Socratic approach) is *dialectical*. As it was the most scrupulous attention to the dialectical aspects of both the *Politics* and the *Republic* that distinguished the previous chapters of *The City and Man*, so Strauss now treats Thucydides as the necessary first rung of dialectics.

One last point remains for Strauss to make about what is “first for us.” It concerns cities at peace or rest. Then the city has “kindlier thoughts” (cf. 3.82.2) and is more given to admiration of the ancient and ancestral. “Neither according to the classical philosophers nor according to Thucydides himself is the concern with the divine simply the primary concern of the city, but the fact that it is primary ‘for us’ . . . is brought out more clearly by Thucydides than by the philosophers.” He attends to all the sacred things “for which the modern scientific historian has no use or which annoy him, and to which classical political philosophy barely alludes because for it the concern with the divine has become identical with philosophy.” Strauss here returns to another distinguishing characteristic of his work on Thucydides, his almost unique attention to the theme of piety. We are now capable of comprehending that attention. Even if piety is not simply the primary concern of the city, still it is “first for us” (sc. in the pre-modern articulation of the world) inasmuch as we claim to honor it the most. It therefore supplies a semblance the scrutiny of which is crucial to our dialectical ascent to the truth: an ascent that the Athenians and Melians begin but which neither is able to complete. It is here that this chapter most improves on the earlier lecture: that in the new weight that Thucydides is credited with ascribing to opinion he emerges as not a pre-Socratic but what we might call a co-Socratic (see above, 51–2). “Only by beginning at this point will we be open to the full impact of the all-important question which is coeval with philosophy although the philosophers do not frequently pronounce it—the question *quid sit deus*.” “What is a god?” (Or “the god,” or “God”: the Latin is ambiguous.) Certainly this ending to both the chapter and the book is enigmatic. The pursuit of the theme of the city and man culminates in a question about the divine. The return to the “common sense” philosophy of Plato and Aristotle requires that we regain as well that pre-philosophical view of the world without which philosophy remains unintelligible. Yet by describing *quid sit deus* as the “all-important question” Strauss points to a problem that reflection on the city and man may entail but which appears to lead far beyond it: the problem of the relation of reason and revelation or of philosophy and prophecy. As Strauss suggests, *quid sit deus* was a pagan question

too, one “coeval with philosophy.” But can we remain satisfied with a pagan answer to it?¹³

3 “Preliminary Observations on the Gods in Thucydides’ Work”¹⁴

We remark at the outset that this product of the final years of Strauss’ life is, like his other later writings, opaque. Insofar as it is readily intelligible, it may seem no more than a repetition of points already made in the chapter in *The City and Man*. Strauss himself states that the work “‘repeat[s]’ . . . some observations” in the chapter—while adding after “repeat”: “(i.e. modify).” “No necessary purpose would be served by stressing the differences” between his two statements, however, so Strauss does not.

Whatever then of the chapter is not repeated in the “Observations” requires no modification; Strauss reaffirms it by his very silence. Whatever is repeated is so only with modification. One difficulty of the “Observations” is that while the repetitions are obvious the modifications are elusive.

“Modification” may of course imply a correction of an earlier account, which as such at least partly contradicts it. It may also imply mere elaboration, however, which expands without contradicting. Most of Strauss’ modifications appear to be of this sort.

Still, it remains the case that Strauss “modifies” only selectively, so that what might at first appear a comprehensive canvass of Thucydides’ references to the gods proves strikingly incomplete. The “Observations” mentions, for example, neither 2.16–17 nor 8.109 (cf. Strauss [1964], 178 and 227n89). Nor do the gods always command the spotlight. Consider, for example, the dense final pages (101–104), in which impiety, public observances, and oaths each receive only a single brief mention in an argument seemingly preoccupied with other matters. Throughout Strauss interweaves his comments about the gods with other ruminations their relation to which remains enigmatic.

13 For a different account of Thucydides’ significance for Strauss see Kleinhaus (2001) 93–95.

14 According to Joseph Cropsey, Strauss’ literary executor, Strauss “had requested a year or so before his death that the writings contained in this book [sc. *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*] be gathered together and published in their present order and under the title that now appears at their head.” (Cropsey in Strauss [1983] vii). This means that Strauss not only intended for his late study of Thucydides to appear as one of his *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, but that he intended for it to appear out of chronological order (after the studies of Plato, thus mirroring the order of the studies in *The City and Man*).

We might say in Strauss' defense that to consider "the gods in Thucydides' work," that is, their role in the work, requires noting their absence no less than their presence. Strauss' Thucydides appears more concerned with the circumstances under which men either invoke the divine or omit to do so than he is with its existence in any other sense: he offers a "phenomenology" of such invocation. This is one answer to the question of *quid sit deus*: the divine as a permanent feature of the relationship between the city and man.

Yet Strauss has also suggested a different sort of answer to that question. This answer, present in the chapter, is absent from the "Observations." As noted, however, this very absence implies Strauss' reaffirmation of it. "If . . . the divine law properly understood is the interplay of motion and rest, one must study (Thucydides') work in light of the question of how that divine law is related to the divine law in the ordinary understanding" (see above, pp. 57–8). If the divine law properly understood is neither divine nor a law in the accustomed sense of those terms, then the divine law as understood in that accustomed sense is not primary but derivative. It is not the truth about the cosmos but a political refraction of it. Yet as political life itself exhibits the cosmic interplay of motion and rest, so must this interplay shape all its aspects including piety in the usual sense. "The gods," then, as the subject of Strauss' observations, designates both an aspect of the political and that of which politics as such is an aspect. This ambiguity is fundamental to Thucydides' presentation (cf. Strauss' remark at 89–90 on the use of the term *daimonic* in the work).

With this in mind we may consider Strauss' remark "that it is easy for us to find that the references to 'the divine law' in Thucydides' account of the civil wars . . . and in the dialogue between the Melians and the Athenians are the most important and the most revealing statements . . . as far as the gods are concerned" (96). Having commented on the vagueness of the term "divine" alike in the relevant statements of Thucydides and in those of his Melians and Athenians, Strauss notes that Thucydides "clearly disapproves of breaches of the divine law, whereas he refrains from passing judgment on the Athenians' theology as stated by their ambassadors on Melos." There is an obvious problem here: the divine law in the usual sense can rely on the earnest support of Thucydides, but can it rely on that of the gods?

The second half of the "Observations" is dominated by the sequence Melian Dialogue/Sicilian Disaster and by the opposition Nicias/Alcibiades. Strauss' very last observation conveys Thucydides' tacit vindication of the abominable Alcibiades, the immoderate bringer of moderation (104; cf. 102). As for Nicias, whose hopes prove the undoing of so many, "he would have deserved a better fate [due to his practice of conventional virtue] . . . but his theology is refuted by his fate" (100–101).

“Thucydides’ theology—if it is permitted to use this expression—is located in the mean (in the Aristotelian sense) between that of Nikias and that of the Athenian ambassadors on Melos” (101). Strauss does not elaborate. At first this statement is puzzling: how can there be a mean—in the Aristotelian sense or any other—between an affirmation of divine providence and a denial of it? Does Strauss mean to suggest that while no gods will intervene on behalf of the pious, the impious will likely come to grief? That while piety rests on a hopeful delusion, impiety founders on its internal contradictions, fatal to the conditions for a “free city” (see above, pp. 64–66)?

The “Observations” provides a fitting coda to Strauss’ lifelong study of Thucydides. It accentuates the two most novel aspects of that study (which are closely related): the discovery of Thucydides as a thinker of the first rank and the centrality of the issue of piety to grasping him as such. The title of the piece suffices to explain why it raises more questions than it answers. Despite his long reflection on Thucydides, Strauss makes no claim to have progressed beyond preliminaries. Neither, probably, should we.

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On Leo Strauss' "Notes on Lucretius"

James H. Nichols, Jr.

Leo Strauss published "Notes on Lucretius" in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (1968; hereafter *LAM*), a collection of ten writings of various sorts, eight of them previously published.¹ The fifth chapter is "Notes on Lucretius," the longest chapter by a good margin (the second longest being the sixth chapter, on Maimonides, "How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*"). It is one of two chapters that deal with one work by an ancient author (the other being the essay "On the *Minos*," a short dialogue of Plato on law); and one of two chapters (along with the *Minos* chapter) that was not reprinted from elsewhere.² In this book's "Preface," Strauss referred to his effort in earlier publications to "lay bare the fundamental difference between classical and modern political philosophy" and characterized the present volume as "adumbrating" that difference in several manners. Lucretius is particularly important within the plan of the book since in his poem "premodern thought seems to come closer to modern thought than anywhere else" (viii).

1 Earlier Writings by Strauss on Epicurus and Lucretius

Although Leo Strauss published "Notes on Lucretius" rather late in his life, in 1968, his interest in Epicurus and Lucretius goes back to his earliest writings. In the first chapter, "The Tradition of the Critique of Religion," of his first book, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (hereafter *SCR*), Strauss examined Epicureanism as the classic exemplar of the critique of religion. He was concerned to clarify the motive of the Epicurean critique of religion: to promote a better life, which in the context of Epicurean hedonism means, of course, a more pleasant life. A more pleasant life for Epicurus does not involve more and more pleasures heaped upon one another, since nature has imposed limits on pleasure such that increases in pleasure are in many case accompanied by greater pains, but purer and more secure pleasures. The greatest enemy of secure pleasure is the

¹ Numbers standing alone in parentheses without any other indication refer to pages in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*. The article "Notes on Lucretius" occupies pages 76–139.

² The first of seven sections of the Lucretius chapter had been published in Strauss (1967).

sense of being "threatened by eternal and limitless pain" from punitive gods (SCR 40). Hence Epicurus is "the only thinker who saw in criticism of religion his highest task, the fulfillment of his interest," and thus "in Epicurus a universal human motive for rebellion against religion finds its expression" (SCR 42).

Strauss first says that the theorems of the Epicurean account of nature are "only means" to the end of tranquility of mind, but he goes on to assert that this is an overstatement, for Epicurus does not "reconstruct the world as a figment in harmony with his impelling interest." Rather, he is predisposed to select those facts and explanations which promote equanimity (SCR 41). Ignorance of causes is the necessary condition for fear of the gods, especially when we are faced with unusual and terrible occurrences; the attribution of these events to gods is furthered by human experiences of dreams.

Strauss summarized basic Epicurean conceptions of religion that are evident in Lucretius and were "handed down in various ways to the seventeenth century": "a fundamental cleavage between science and religion to the effect that fear of the gods can arise and persist only on condition that knowledge of real causes is lacking"; this fear is actuated especially by the experience of unusual and striking dangers (SCR 46). Strauss is also concerned with articulating seventeenth century concerns additional to those of the Epicureans. One was the need to oppose religion for the sake of the defense of theory, since revealed religion often attacked theories as heresy or denial of religion (SCR 47). And whereas Epicureanism aimed at individual peace of mind, seventeenth century thinkers, moved by their observation of religious strife, aimed also or even chiefly at "peace within society" (SCR 51).

In his next book, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors* (hereafter *PL*), Strauss developed more distinctly and deeply the differences between the original Epicurean critique of religion and the critique launched by the modern Enlightenment. The Jewish tradition that called all philosophers "Epicureans" had a strong foundation; it suspected that the motivation for any rebellion against the Law was love of pleasure, Epicureanism. And the original motive for the Epicurean critique of religion was indeed the desire for the most pleasant life. For the modern Enlightenment critique of religion, the Epicurean critique was "the foundation, or more exactly the foreground." But whereas the Epicurean opposed religion above all because the religious delusion was terrible and distressing, the modern Enlightenment opposed it above all because it is a delusion—one which leads people away from concern with the real goods of this world (and leaves them susceptible to being manipulated by the authoritative spokesmen of the other world and thus vulnerable to being cheated of the real goods of this world by a greedy clergy). Freed from this delusion, one can see that a

stingy and hostile nature needs to be mastered, transformed, by human efforts; one needs not so much “to cultivate his garden” as “in the first place to plant himself a ‘garden’ by making himself the master and owner of nature.” The Enlightenment thinkers were not content, like the Epicureans, to “live in hiding”; they had a social and political mission to fight for.³ The Epicurean critique thus “undergoes an essential change in the age of the Enlightenment” (Strauss 1935, 35–36).⁴

Near the end of “The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right,” the third chapter of *Natural Right and History*, published 17 years later, Strauss wrote two paragraphs, each over two pages in length, about Epicureanism and Lucretius. Up to that point in the chapter, Strauss had developed a detailed analysis of the origin of philosophy through the discovery of nature, whereby things existing by nature came to be distinguished from things made by art, agreed on by human convention, or merely held to be by human opinion; and he had explored in depth the conventionalist arguments that justice, law, and the political community or the city exist by convention, not by nature. Having noted Plato’s claim that the conventionalist thesis could be reduced to the doctrines of hedonism and materialism, Strauss then characterized Epicureanism as “the most developed form of classical hedonism” and asserted that Epicureanism is “that form of conventionalism which has exercised the greatest influence throughout the ages.” Strauss shows that for Epicureanism, justice is useful and prudence directs one to follow it. He quotes Epicurus: “the right [or just] of nature is a *symbolon* of the advantage deriving from men’s not harming each other and not being harmed.” Thus there is a right or justice of nature, and in an equivalent formulation, justice can be said to have a nature; but it cannot be called natural right, for it exists not by nature but by convention. Our nature impels us toward our own individual good and not toward the good of the city, which also exists not by nature but only by convention, and accordingly the

3 Strauss suggests that, unable to provide a truly adequate refutation of orthodoxy, Enlightenment philosophers followed a Napoleonic strategy of moving beyond an impregnable fortress in a continued offensive. The transformation of the world in service of a philosophically developed ideal would eventually make the orthodox position irrelevant. (Strauss 1935, 32).

4 Strauss went on to indicate that the latest variant of the Enlightenment transformation of Epicurean critique of religion issues in “the ‘atheist’ who rejects for reasons of conscience the belief in God.” In opposition to the Epicurean view, religion is then understood as a comforting delusion, which the intellectual virtue of probity requires us to reject. Strauss proceeds to elaborate the view that probity is a moral virtue of Biblical origin and to be distinguished from love of truth (Strauss 1935, 36–7 and 137–38 [n. 13]).

continuation in existence of our city and of its laws depends on compulsion (Strauss 1953, 109–111).

Strauss calls Lucretius' poem *On the Nature of Things* "the greatest document of philosophic conventionalism and, in fact, its only document available to us that is both authentic and comprehensive." He sums up Lucretius' account of human development given in the poem's fifth book. From an originally savage and solitary state, human beings develop a pre-political society with "habits of kindness and fidelity." This, Strauss claims, was in Lucretius' view "the best and happiest society that ever was." The practices constituting right in that society, however, are not natural right, for the best life according to nature is that of the philosopher, which becomes possible only in the more developed life of cities. And "the happiness of early non-coercive society" rested on a "salutary delusion" about the security and finiteness of our world; "they trusted in the eternity of the visible universe or in the protection afforded to them by the 'walls of the world.'" In this short account of Lucretius' long poem, Strauss refers five times to the poet's *moenia mundi*, "walls of the world." Trust in the firmness of these "walls of the world" comes to be shaken by natural catastrophes. Men become savage in their search for security and eventually come to a belief in gods who guarantee the world's security; but the belief in active gods also generates the terrors, and other evils, of religion. The only remedy productive of happiness is philosophy, which breaks through the "walls of the world"; it shows us, and reconciles us to, the fact "that we live in every respect in an unvalled city, in an infinite universe in which nothing that man can love can be eternal." People for the most part find this view repulsive; rejecting it and unable to return "to the happy simplicity of early society," they must live an unnatural life "characterized by the co-operation of coercive society and religion" (Strauss 1953, 112–13).

In the fifth chapter of *Natural Right and History*, on modern natural right, Strauss presents Hobbes as developing a new synthesis of Platonism and Epicureanism, political hedonism, on a different plane from that on which those two philosophies combated each other over the centuries. Hobbes adopts the public-spirited purpose of improving politics from the Platonic tradition of political philosophy (along with its holding mathematics to be exemplary knowledge), while devising the construction of political order in a realistic, not an idealistic, mode; he adopts the materialism and hedonism of the Epicureans. Strauss focuses on Hobbes' endeavor to construct an intelligible human system in the context of a fundamentally unintelligible natural whole. The natural beginnings of men are miserable; Hobbes' hopeful vision is of a City of Man constructed in the face of the universe's unintelligibility, not to say hostility (and "erected on the ruins of the City of God"). Strauss writes:

It is hard for us to understand how Hobbes could be so hopeful where there was so much cause for despair. Somehow the experience, as well as the legitimate anticipation, of unheard-of progress within the sphere which is subject to human control must have made him insensitive to “the eternal silence of those infinite spaces” or to the crackings of the *moenia mundi*. (Strauss 1953, 175)

It is the openness to eternity, whether of the seventeenth century Christian philosopher Pascal or the ancient materialist philosophic poet, that Strauss evoked as the crucial thing lost when modern thinkers narrowed their philosophic perspective for the sake of efficacy in transforming political society.

2 The Overall Character and Themes of “Notes on Lucretius”

In the “Preface” to *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, Strauss presents the book’s collection of writings as setting forth further results of his inquiry into the difference between ancient and modern thinkers. The poem of Lucretius, he comments, comes closer to modern thought than any other ancient way of thinking; he elaborates with this memorable sentence: “No premodern writer seems to have been as deeply moved as Lucretius was by the thought that nothing lovable is eternal or sempiternal or deathless, or that the eternal is not lovable.” (viii). Strauss’ interest in Lucretius thus resembles in a key respect his better-known and far more extensively expressed devotion to understanding Xenophon. Like Lucretius, Xenophon came in some way quite close to the modern approach. Strauss had pointed out, in the “Introduction” to *On Tyranny*, that Machiavelli did not mention medieval or early modern “mirrors of princes” writings, but that he did refer emphatically to Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus*. *The Prince* bypassed the distinction between king or prince and tyrant, indeed never mentioning the term *tyrant*. But (in the *Discourses*) Machiavelli did refer to one earlier writing on tyranny, Xenophon’s *Hiero*. This dialogue, Strauss asserted, “comes as near to the teaching of the *Prince* as the teaching of any Socratic could possibly come.” Strauss suggests that Xenophon’s *Hiero* “marks the point of closest contact between premodern and modern political science.”

“Notes on Lucretius” displays the characteristics of Strauss’ later writings. In earlier writings he sought to state and to defend large, provocative, and often striking generalizations about political philosophy, such as the following. Some fundamental differences separate ancient and modern philosophers. The approach taken by ancient, especially Socratic, philosophy, has

not been refuted by modern philosophers but remains a possible—indeed preferable—philosophic alternative today. The arguments for a value-free social science are inadequate; when the arguments are thought through, the value-free scientist is led to become a historical relativist. The historical relativism regnant in philosophic circles today fails to carry rational conviction. Many careful philosophic authors of the past saw a deep disproportion between pursuit of the truth and the city's requirements for its well-being; moved then by well-grounded fear of persecution, by a sense of responsibility toward the well-being of their societies, and by a desire to increase the security of philosophy's position in society through enhancing philosophy's political and moral respectability, many of these philosopher became careful writers with a highly developed philosophic rhetoric who wrote, exoterically, writings whose surface tended to support the decent and respectable opinions of their societies but whose depths, accessible only through uncommonly careful reading and interpretation, convey a more radical philosophic teaching between the lines. Strauss' bold theses in the earlier writings seem to invite more complex development and qualification. To give a striking example: in the "Introduction" to *Philosophy and Law*, Strauss describes the work's aim as "to awaken a prejudice in favor of this view of Maimonides"—that is, the view that Maimonides' rationalism (which is ultimately a kind of Platonic or Aristotelian rationalism) is "the true natural model"—"and, even more, to arouse suspicion against the powerful opposing prejudice"—that is, against the opinion that the modern Enlightenment displays superior rationality. To associate one's controversial thesis with prejudice is certainly to invite further inquiry.

In later writings (among them the two books on Xenophon's Socratic writings, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws*), Strauss rarely makes the broad provocative statements found in the earlier writings. These later efforts seem rather to involve detailed inquiry into texts with full openness to their complexity and nuances. Rather than arguing to persuade the reader of important truths about how best to understand the great tradition of political philosophy, Strauss seems in these later writings to fashion curious signposts for the engaged reader to provoke him to think his way from the text's surface into the depths of the author's intention and teaching. The form of these later writings is typically commentary; Strauss follows the text on which he is commenting quite closely, usually following the text's own order. Not infrequently the commentary may at first appear indistinguishable from summary, but a closer look reveals unobtrusively stated elements of Strauss' own analysis. A typical paragraph in "Notes on Lucretius" might start with Strauss' summary of a passage in Lucretius; the end of the summary is

indicated by the citation in parentheses of the verses that have been summarized; then Strauss adds further comments, raising questions about, for example, why the matters dealt with in the passage in question occur here, how they related to what preceded and what follows, the implications of the passage, and its relation to other statements by Lucretius on the same or a related topic. The “summary” itself has important analytical and interpretive aspects: it often indicates unstated connections among the parts of the passages, clarifies the passage’s relation with what went before, or brings to light the rhetorical strategy that underlies the topics or examples discussed by the poet.

The structure of Strauss’ article is plain. It has seven sections: one on each of the six books of Lucretius’ poem, preceded by a first section entitled “1. Ascent,” which itself has three subsections: “1. The Opening (I 1–148),” “2. The Ending (VI 1138–1286),” and “3. The Function of Lucretius’ Poetry I 926–950 and IV 1–25).” The most prominent themes of the article involve three intricately interrelated subjects: the poetic character of Lucretius’ presentation of Epicurean philosophy and, in necessary connection with that, the poet’s understanding of the most widespread and also the deepest human passions; the significance for human beings of our situation in the natural world as understood by Epicurean physics; and Lucretius’ accounting for and critically assessing our thoughts about the gods and the immortality or mortality of the human soul. The totality of the commentary, in its inquiry into these themes, develops a coherent account of the Lucretian understanding of the character of philosophy or science and its relation to how we live (especially in respect to our notions regarding morality, politics, and religion).

3 **The Introduction: “Ascent”**

The first of the seven sections of “Notes on Lucretius” was separately published a year before *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* in a festschrift for Karl Löwith. Entitled “Ascent,” it gives a kind of overview of the whole poem, through three subsections (and thus it can reasonably stand by itself). The “ascent” referred to in the section’s title is the movement from being a prominent Roman (like the poem’s addressee, Memmius), upward through the discoveries of the Greek man (Epicurus, of course, but not named here) to a genuinely rational understanding of things, free from false opinions and vain terrors. Strauss develops this overall analysis of the poem’s character, structure, and purpose through discussions of the introduction to the whole poem at the beginning of Book I, the poem’s ending in Book VI with the plague in Athens, and Lucretius’

explanation of the character and purpose of his poetry (once toward the end of Book I and repeated as the preface to Book IV).

Strauss' account of the opening (verses 1–148) of *On the Nature of Things* is a close commentary on every part of the passage, with an emphasis on how the poet seeks to lead the reader from the normal concerns of a Roman toward interest in the Epicurean philosophic teaching. The famous invocation of Venus at the poem's very beginning links Rome to the whole of nature: Venus through her son Aeneas is the source of the Roman race, and Venus, by calling natural beings to propagate their kind, can be addressed as sole governor of the nature of things. Also, the aid of Venus, the most beautiful divinity, is most appropriately called upon by the poet who seeks beauty's charm for his verses. And finally, Venus alone can subdue the god of war, Mars; the poet therefore prays to her for peace for Rome, so that he will have the equanimity to write his poem and so that Memmius, the poem's addressee, will not be compelled to occupy himself with the common safety of Rome and thus lack the leisure to listen.

This invocation of Venus ends with a six-line general statement about the gods—a statement that Strauss later calls “the fundamental theologoumenon,” that is, the fundamental thing said about the gods (96, 100, 120, 130). This statement is repeated in Book II in a context where the Epicurean teaching is being elaborated and where the statement is preceded by lines that show that this statement differs from prevailing views of the gods. But here in the first book's introduction, Strauss makes clear, the lines occur in a pre-Epicurean context; they assert that the gods enjoy perfect peace remote from our affairs and are swayed by neither our good nor our bad deeds. Coming right after the poet's prayerful request of peace from Venus, they let the reader imagine that the peaceful nature of the gods makes it particularly likely that Venus would wish to bestow peace, to the advantage of her favored Romans.⁵

Strauss shows the order of thought in the remaining parts of the introduction through articulating questions (some stated by Lucretius, some not) that arise at each stage. Having invoked Venus, Lucretius announces his fundamental topic, the principles of physics, the first bodies, the atoms. But why should Memmius be interested? The poet proceeds to show that before this knowledge became available, human life groveled under the oppression of terrible religion, against which first arose a Greek man, whose mind went far beyond

5 Thus Strauss makes sense of Lucretius' placement of these lines on the nature of the gods here as well as in Book II; the lines have a different valence for the reader in the two places. A number of scholars had bracketed these lines in Book I; see Bailey (1947) 601–603.

the walls of the world to understand the whole. But does not such inquiry amount to criminal impiety? Far from it, Lucretius replies; far more often is religion the cause of criminal deeds—an assertion that he supports with the single example, presented in moving poetic detail, of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia. Strauss notes the weakness of the proof: one example, from many centuries earlier, in another place, of human sacrifice—a practice that has been given up long ago, with no evidence that the giving up had anything to do with philosophy (79). Might Memmius not still fear divine retribution after death? The mortal nature of the soul must then be addressed, and an explanation given of how we can think we see images of the dead; Strauss notes that Lucretius' presentation here leads one to wonder whether not divine action in this world but rather punishment of the immortal soul after death is the deepest ground of religious terror. Strauss ends his analysis of the introduction thus:

The opening of the poem leads from Venus, the joy of gods and men, to the promise of the true joy which comes from the understanding of nature. The poem itself is meant to fulfill that promise. Let us turn at once to its ending in order to see how the promise has been fulfilled. (80)

Strauss' discussion of the end of the poem treats Lucretius' depiction of the plague at Athens (famously presented in the second book of Thucydides' history); it is noteworthy for indicating that Lucretius' depiction is even grimmer than Thucydides', in part because Lucretius' silence on the context of war emphasizes the plague's naturalness (81). And Strauss notes that Lucretius gives no indication that an Epicurean or other philosopher would fare any better in such wretched circumstances than anyone else. Thus, "by revealing fully the nature of things, philosophy proves to be not simply a 'sweet solace' (v 21). Nevertheless, the movement from Venus to nature, which is destructive as it is creative, is an ascent" (83).

The truth thus can be "repulsive and depressing" at first sight; this fact is central to the need for and the character of Lucretius' poetry, which Strauss analyzes in the third subsection. To bring people to accept such bitter philosophic truth, a special effort is needed, which is the work of poetry, not philosophy as such; Lucretius' poetry "makes bright and sweet the obscure and sad findings of the Greeks, that is, of the philosophers" (83). The poetic presentation plays a role like that of honey smeared by a doctor on the rim of a cup containing bitter medicine for a child to take; the truth like the medicine will, if taken and absorbed, eventually cure. Someone afflicted with religious terrors will most likely not be willing to accept the naked truth, but may begin to learn

it when it has been made attractive through Lucretian poetry. "We conclude that poetry is the link or the mediation between philosophy and religion" (84).

Strauss concludes this first section with a restatement and further development of his argument in *Natural Right and History* that religion arose when men (after developing language, the arts, society, and laws) came to doubt the permanence of our world. "Religion thus serves as a refuge from the fear of the end or the death of the world; it has its root in man's attachment to the world." Philosophy, breaking in thought through the walls of the world, abandons—painfully—the attachment to this world of ours, whereas religion and poetry are rooted in attachment to our world. But poetry can be put into the service of philosophic detachment. Thus the philosophic poet, Strauss concludes, is "the perfect mediator between the attachment to the world and the attachment to detachment from the world. The joy or pleasure which Lucretius' poem arouses is therefore austere, reminding of the pleasure aroused by the work of Thucydides." The book by book analyses that follow are guided especially by Strauss' elaboration and deepening of how the poet mediates between the philosophic truth about the nature of things and the human passions, attachments, and opinions that characterize the reader's initial condition. These analyses focus especially on how the poet deals both with the gods, mortality, love, political community, and law and with the powerful human opinions and sentiments about these matters.

4 Strauss' Commentary Book by Book

4.1 *On the First Book*

The poem's first book presents the fundamental principles of Epicurean physics, criticizes the views of earlier natural philosophers, and ends with the elaboration of the consequence that the universe is infinite. Strauss begins by contrasting Lucretius' assertion that in our account of things "we" refer them to the "first bodies" with people's ordinary habit of giving an account of many things "by tracing them to gods." Strauss elaborates the observation in general terms by saying that prior to any philosophic ascent people are under the spell of the ancestral and identify the true and the good with the ancestral. "A flexible man who by travelling has become aware of the thought of many peoples"—Strauss doubtless evokes Odysseus here—may come to doubt the equation of the true and the good with the ancestral; but since, as Lucretius points out, all people trace at least many things to gods, he would still believe in active gods. Only further thinking could lead to the insight that "activity is

incompatible with the bliss of gods," that is, to the fundamental theological statement that Lucretius has already made. "For some reason Lucretius does not use this theological insight at the beginning of his exposition of the truth" (85–86). Through this puzzling beginning, Strauss seems to point to the crucial importance of how assertions about the gods relate to the truths of Epicurean philosophy.

Lucretius begins by asserting that "nothing ever comes into being out of nothing through gods." He supports this principle by giving six examples that show that everything that comes into being depends on specific conditions. Strauss points out that this approach is independent of any assertion about the gods' bliss, and we seem thus invited to wonder about the cognitive status of that fundamental theological statement. The parallel assertion, that nothing perishes into nothing, is supported by four arguments. In discussing Lucretius' treatment of these fundamental principles, Strauss attends particularly to their affective character, showing how Lucretius follows his poetic principle "that the sweet must precede the sad and that the sad must be sweetened" (87). This focus of attention continues in Strauss' discussion of how Lucretius proves the existence of invisible bodies and of the void, "the only kind of nothing that is." At this point, Strauss shows that Lucretius has presented a fundamental reasoning that excludes divine action but is not yet explicitly Epicurean, and that we may therefore say that for Lucretius "one can overcome the terrors of religion without being an Epicurean; it is sufficient for this purpose to become a *physiologos*⁶ in general" (88). Strauss thus invites us to consider whether or to what extent the goal of freedom from religious fears requires Epicureanism, the poem having given the first impression that Epicureanism was not only sufficient but necessary for that goal.

With his arguments for indestructible first bodies (atoms), Lucretius develops specifically Epicurean teachings, which he supports further through criticisms of the alternative philosophies of Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras. Strauss suggests that Lucretius' "amazing silence about Plato and Aristotle" perhaps signifies that they, unlike the three philosophers addressed, "are not helpful in the fight against religion" (91).

Lucretius' statement on his poetry occurs now, when Lucretius has completed the exposition of basic atomist doctrine. Here the poet first refers to his own hope for fame. Strauss comments, "However sad the truth may be, to be the first who speaks about the sad truth in charming verses is not sad." His

6 A *physiologos* is someone who gives a rational account of nature; Aristotle uses the term for those like Heraclitus and Anaxagoras whom we tend to call pre-Socratic philosophers.

fame could even, perhaps, be greater than that of his Greek teacher. "He surely possesses an art which his master lacked. This art presupposes a deep understanding of the feelings which obstruct the acceptance of the true doctrine by most men—an understanding which the master did not necessarily possess" (92). This discussion of poetry is a prelude to his statement of the novel and unsettling consequence of atomism, that the universe is infinite, space is infinite, the number of atoms is infinite. "Finiteness is comforting; infinity is terrifying. Yet without infinity there cannot be 'things,' that is, finiteness." Strauss ends this section with a striking example of Lucretius' poetic principle. Against the apparently more attractive view that our world is held together by a striving toward the center (with our earth at the center), Lucretius points out that an infinite universe cannot have a center; he argues that the apparently more attractive view would actually lead to the whole world's perishing. "He does not say here that this is the inevitable fate of the world precisely on the basis of Epicureanism; he does not say here that the gate of death is not shut on the world." (93). This will be said in Book v; Strauss thus draws our attention to a particularly important example of how Lucretius for now sweetens his presentation by accommodating the reader's attachment to this world of ours; the bitter teaching of its impermanence will become explicit only later.

4.2 *On Book II*

Strauss begins his discussion of this book by comparing lines 14–61 of its proem, which are a praise "of that life of man as man which is in accordance with nature" with Book I's opening praise of Venus. He then turns back to the first 13 lines, which speak of the gratification one feels when beholding evils suffered by others from which one is oneself free, of which he gives three examples: observing from the land someone "struggling in a wind-tossed sea," watching armies in battle from a position of safety, and—sweetest of all—looking down from the heights of wisdom on the others struggling for superiority with each other. Strauss notes that "The sad is a necessary foil for the sweet, for sensing the sweet." For Strauss this proem raises important questions. Do the gods need to behold the misery of men in order to enjoy their supreme bliss? Is the pleasure referred to in the first 13 lines natural? He goes on to posit the problematic relation between the character of nature as revealed by Epicurean science and the philosopher's search for happiness:

Man's happiness requires that he be free from "the blind night" in which he finds himself prior to philosophy; yet philosophy discovers the roots of all things in empty space and the "blind" atoms (I 1110, 1115–1116). Nothing is more alien to wisdom than that with which wisdom is above

everything else concerned: the atoms and the void. The first things are in no way a model for man. (94)

Throughout his analyses of teaching about atoms and their motions, Strauss pays particular attention to two things: how these teachings relate to the learner himself (as in the quote just above), and how these facts about the atoms and their motions relate to what we could reasonably believe about gods and their constitution. Lucretius teaches that every thing, including our whole world, comes into being from the random collisions of atoms. The “diametrically opposed view” is that the world is so carefully and rationally designed for human well-being that it could only be the work of gods. Lucretius rejects this view, and not just because he is Epicurean. Even if he did not know about the origins of things in the movements of atoms in the void, “he would dare to assert from the very manner of working of heaven as well as from many other things that the nature of the world is not created for our benefit by divine power; by nature the world abounds in defects.” Strauss notes that the rejected theological view, in trying to establish a harmony between the natural whole and man, seeks to be comforting rather than terrifying, and that the theological account can be rejected without recourse to the Epicurean fundamental theologoumenon (95–96).

Lucretius sets forth the notorious Epicurean doctrine of the random swerve in atomic movement, necessary to explain how atoms all moving downward in the void at the same speed would collide, so that things could come into being. “Atoms are so little attractive that they do not even attract one another,” Strauss comments. Without this randomness, everything would be necessarily determined by fate, which contradicts our experience of freedom (an experience that we share with all other animals, as Lucretius presents it). Whereas Epicurus had declared that belief in the deterministic fate of the physicists “is worse than belief in the tale of the gods since fate is inexorable, whereas the gods of the tale are not,” Lucretius does not follow him in this point; he does not avail himself of this possible sweetening of the Epicurean doctrine as compared to other teachings about nature (96).

Nothing that is manifest, Lucretius teaches, is made up of one type of atom only. The more types of atoms of which something consists, the more powers it has. Strauss wonders about the immanifest gods: are they made up of one kind of atom only, which would make them the weakest of beings? The earth, in contrast, contains the most kinds of atoms and has the most diverse powers. Accordingly, it has been called the Great Mother. Lucretius gives a detailed account from learned Greek poets of the Great Mother’s procession—features which, Strauss notes, promote the political and moral purposes of encourag-

ing pious regard for parents and love of the fatherland. Lucretius praises some of these thoughts, but rejects them on the grounds of the fundamental theologoumenon (that "the gods are free from all pain and danger and that they are wholly unconcerned with men, with their merits or crimes"). Lucretius also, Strauss points out, rejects the divinity of the earth for another reason: the earth lacks perception or feeling at all times (100).

Book II ends with a necessary consequence, the teaching that there are infinite worlds and that worlds come into being, grow old, and pass away. Strauss emphasizes the terrifying quality of this novel view and notes that Lucretius sweetens it by presenting the end of the world as foreshadowed by the world's old age. An aged plowman laments the world's decline as he works harder to grow less abundant crops than his ancestors. If not exactly sweetened, a doctrine presented as somehow known to every peasant is at least made less terrifying. (103–4).

4.3 *On Book III*

Strauss begins his discussion of this book with the suggestion that it is the peak of the poem. This suggestion emerges from several close textual observations, such as that only in this book does Lucretius address Epicurus, only here does he mention Epicurus' name. From the proem to this third book as well as from various details of its development, Strauss leads us to see that the deepest fear is "not the fear of hell, but the fear of death." Book III "is *the* Book devoted to the overcoming of 'our' childish fear." Strauss devotes roughly equal space to each of the Book's three parts: on the nature of the soul; on its mortality; and on the concluding attack on the fear of death on the grounds that death is nothing to us. (105–6).

Strauss notes that the first part of the book begins and ends with criticisms by Lucretius of two doctrines about the soul that are no less effective in proving the soul's mortality than the Epicurean doctrine. Of the Greek doctrine of the soul as a kind of harmony of the body, Strauss asserts that "it is the first doctrine explicitly discussed which is rejected merely because it is wrong and not at the same time with a view to its effect on man's feeling." (106). Regarding Democritus' teaching about "the local order of the body atoms and the soul atoms," Strauss notes the high respect shown it by Lucretius, who "applies to him or to his doctrine the epithet 'sacred.'" (108).

In proving the mortality of the soul Lucretius "cannot help presenting to us vividly the sad spectacles of men's sudden or slow deaths, of their diseases and decay, although he never comes near to that accumulation of horrors which he has reserved for the end of his work" (109). The fear of death and our revulsion at death appear to be quite natural, even if ultimately irrational. In arguing

for our mortality, Lucretius asserts that only atoms, void, and the universe can be immortal. Without mentioning the gods, “he compels us to think of the gods” (110).

Strauss pays particular attention to the rhetorical character of Lucretius’ presentation of arguments against the fear of death—and especially to Lucretius’ putting words, including harsh words, into the mouth of others (such as Nature, and the addressee himself speaking to himself as Lucretius suggests he should). The speeches by Nature and by “the addressee as a mask for Lucretius” are noteworthy for their appeal to a sense of what is right or just. Strauss concludes from the last passage, about men’s efforts to relieve their anxiety and boredom in pointless changes, that “the flight from oneself is the flight from one’s death. To study nature means to learn to accept one’s death without delusion or rebellion and hence to live well” (112–113).

4.4 *On Book IV*

When first discussing Lucretius’ statement about his poetic art, Strauss had characterized Book IV as “devoted to what we may call the acts of the soul or the mind” (83). The meaning of the same verses about poetry—before the last section of Book I and now here as the proem to Book IV—is different in the two different contexts: in Book I the statement’s significance is determined chiefly by its introducing the teaching on infinity which follows. Here, as the proem to Book IV, its meaning inheres chiefly in what it says about the relation of Lucretius to Epicurus. According to Strauss, it corrects the proem to Book III as Book II’s proem (centered on nature) corrected that of Book I (beginning with Venus as progenitor of the Romans). Here Book IV’s proem celebrates what Lucretius does that Epicurus did not; it corrects the humble statement of the proem to Book III in which Lucretius compared himself to Epicurus as a swallow to a swan and as a kid to a strong horse.

The subject treated in most detail in Book IV is the likenesses of things that fly through the air, whereby we can see the things. Strauss’s comments highlight the implications of these teachings for what we do or do not see, and hence what basis we have for knowing, about gods (thus preparing the ground for his probing analysis of the origins of religion in the next book). After discussing the other senses, Lucretius turns to mental likenesses or images, made of even “more subtle” particles than visual images, which we mentally see when dreaming, or imagining, or thinking. Such mental images may be of things that do not exist, like Centaurs, or no longer exist, like the dead; they can also “copy things that are as they are; without such likenesses true thinking would be impossible” (116).

Strauss notes that the subject of Book IV's second half is not easy to state. He divides it into three parts: "(1) critique of the teleological view; (2) explanation (*a*) of the need for food, (*b*) of how we are able to move our limbs in various ways, (*c*) of sleep and dreams; and (3) explanation and critique of love" (116–117). Strauss notes Lucretius' point that we mostly dream of what we are chiefly occupied with doing. A bit earlier, Strauss drew attention to Lucretius' saying that he dreams of seeking for the nature of things, "as if the poet himself . . . were still learning while teaching" (116). The book ends with an attack on love (with frequent mention of *venus* meaning simply sexual love) corresponding to Book III's attack on fear of death; "the deepest reason for this correspondence might well be the fact that both fear and love are roots of the belief in gods" (118). Strauss concludes: "Philosophy counteracts love as it counteracts fear. There is no link between philosophy and *eros*" (119).

4.5 *On Book v and On Book vi*

Books v and vi deal with our world: its non-divinity and mortality; its coming into being; the origin of plants, animals, and men; the development of human life, society, religion, and arts over time; and the explanation of movements of the stars (in Book v) and other celestial and terrestrial phenomena, such as lightning, earthquakes, and plagues (in Book vi). Lucretius' proem to Book v praises Epicurus as a god, on account of his benefactions, above all because of his many sayings about the immortal gods. But since the Epicurean conception of the gods excludes their activity, Strauss asks: "Is the praise of Epicurus as a god not tantamount to saying that Epicurus was a god because he denied the godness of the gods?" (120). Concerning Lucretius' proofs that the world has not been made by gods for man's benefit (alluded to in Book II but developed fully here), Strauss points out that this religious view would be not frightening but comforting. "The truth which he teaches is much harsher than the teaching of religion" (122).

In discussing Lucretius' four arguments for the world's mortality, Strauss points out that only the third is based on specifically Epicurean premises; Lucretius seems to want to prove the world's mortality "on the broadest possible grounds" (122–3). From his account of the coming into being of things, Lucretius turns to "singing" the cause of the stars' motions. Strauss ponders what this unique explicit mention of singing—poetry—reveals. Since we do not know "the cause" but only several possible causes, is it that we sing when we don't know? Or does it suggest something about turning to the way things are when their genesis has been completed? Or might it reflect his silence in this section on the problem of the gods? (124–5).

Lucretius “returns to the youth of the world” to complete his account of coming into being—of plants, animals, and men (125). In his analysis of Lucretius’ account of human development, Strauss incorporates observations made earlier in *Natural Right and History*, but with considerable elaboration, above all on religion. Drawing on the results of constant attention to the problem of the gods and religion throughout the poem, he probes deeply into Lucretius’ statements on the cause of religion’s origin. The fundamental theologoumenon, Strauss concludes, articulates our notion of the gods as the most perfect beings; it “is not meant to prove the existence of gods; their existence is not known” (130). What Strauss calls Lucretius’ “official teaching” is that

The truth is sad because the world is not divine nor of divine origin, but the truth is attractive or comforting above all because the most lovable is sempiternal since there are gods, blessed and immortal beings that are akin to man rather than to any other beings. Yet if the gods are not, the most divine being, the being most resplendent, most beneficent, and most high in rank is the wise man in his frail happiness. (130–1)

The proem to Book VI, Strauss notes, corrects the earlier praise of Epicurus as a god; here he is emphatically a man, but his “divine discoveries” survive him (133). Lucretius here invokes the muse Calliope rather than Venus, as the poet-philosopher Empedocles had done. As philosopher, Empedocles was surpassed by Democritus and further by Epicurus; Strauss suggests that “by restoring the union of philosophy and poetry, by presenting the true and final philosophic teaching poetically, Lucretius may be said to surpass Epicurus” (134).

5 Conclusion

By way of conclusion it seems appropriate to underline two distinctive aspects of Strauss’ interpretation of Lucretius. First, Lucretius’ treatment of religion is complex and deep, as Strauss presents it. Religion first comes to sight as the source of irrational terrors and even of crimes; accordingly, the Epicurean liberation from religion seems at first unmixedly pleasant. But—in accordance with the Lucretian principle of poetic presentation—a more bitter aspect of the Epicurean critique of religion gradually comes to sight, as Lucretius gradually lets us see various beneficial aspects of religion. It plays a role in promoting morality and political order, which, however deficient in producing genuine happiness, are necessary conditions for the best life. It provides a view of our world as permanent, with “walls” whose solidity is guaranteed by divine

beings—a view more consoling than the truth. Furthermore, our natural dread of death finds relief (at the heavy cost, to be sure, of a new kind of fear regarding possible punishments after death) in the belief that valuable beings such as we cannot be simply annihilated. Accordingly, the Epicurean truth turns out to be not in all respects more pleasant than the delusions of religion; it is more stable (because various experiences of nature such as earthquakes may at any time lead us to doubt whether our delusory beliefs really are true), but it demands that we face up to austere limits on our possible happiness.

Secondly, Strauss notes occasional Lucretian sayings that suggest that he might not be the simply Epicurean dogmatist that he seems, for he is still seeking truth about nature. Strauss suggests further that the knowledge of human things needed to be a successful poet in presenting Epicureanism goes beyond what Epicurus himself knew and taught; the poet has deeper knowledge of human beings than the mere Epicurean. Furthermore, whereas Lucretius often depicts himself as a mere follower, Strauss has drawn our attention to some ways in which Lucretius hints at another view, which would confer a higher status on his achievement.

What influence has Strauss' work on Lucretius had? Some books have certainly acknowledged Strauss' influence on their understanding of Lucretius.⁷ But perhaps because his interpretation of Lucretius does not so evidently differ from conventional opinions as do, for example, his interpretations of Xenophon, it has not attracted as much notice. The generally understated and unobtrusive character of Strauss' later writings doubtless contributes to this effect, and in consequence many books and articles on Lucretius make no reference to Strauss' work.⁸ But Strauss' interpretation may have contributed to an increased interest in Lucretius in recent years, especially in regard to Lucretius' importance for early modern thinkers, perhaps above all Machiavelli.⁹ Strauss' article surely supports his assertion that Lucretius is in a crucial respect closer to the modern view than any other pre-modern writer. But Lucretius does not contemplate, let alone launch, anything like the modern project to make us masters of nature. As Strauss noted in his commentary on Book II, "It goes without saying that the realization of the badness of the world does not induce Lucretius for a moment to think of rebellion or conquest: misery is as necessary to human life as happiness" (96). Human life at its best is a frail thing.

7 Nichols (1976), Clay (1983), and Colman (2012) are examples.

8 For example, Greenblatt (2011) lists in his bibliography Clay (1983) and Nichols (1976) but not the Strauss article (although he does list Strauss' *Natural Right and History*).

9 See Brown (2010). Rahe (2007) makes a strong statement of Lucretian influence on Machiavelli's thinking and acknowledges Strauss' important insights into both authors.

“The frailty of human happiness cannot be overcome by any conquest of nature, by the subjection of the whole to human use, for this would require among other things the emancipation of the desires for unnecessary things and therefore the certainty of human misery, of the fate of Sisyphus” (131).

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PART 2

Classical Political Philosophy



Leo Strauss' "The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy"

Timothy W. Burns

Eric Havelock's *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* appeared in 1957. Leo Strauss' review essay of it, "The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy," was published in March 1959 and incorporated as chapter three of *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* in 1968.¹ In the essay Strauss lays out the multiple errors of a work that, conforming as it did to contemporary prejudices, was likely to become influential.² And examining the extraordinarily careful arguments by which Strauss refutes Havelock's thesis is instructive: he manifests a relentless demand for caution, clarity, coherence, probity, and finesse. I will however devote the bulk of my remarks to examining an unobtrusive but important argument that is woven into this thumping. Strauss himself suggests the need to do so. For Havelock's book is of such poor scholarship that Strauss is moved in his conclusion to explain why he bothered reviewing it. Such works, he explains are no longer unusual, and so scholarship, which is supposed to be a "bulwark of civilization against barbarism," is becoming, even among classicists, "an instrument of re-barbarization." In particular, this work shows how the modern liberal demand for tolerance can turn into a "ferocious hatred of those who have stated most clearly and most forcefully that there are unchangeable standards founded in the nature of man and the nature of things" (439). Strauss certainly brings out Havelock's hatred; he is even moved to attribute to Havelock the fanatical motto *Fiat liberalismus pereat Plato*.³

1 Havelock (1957); Strauss (1959); Strauss (1968a).

2 In fact it was Havelock's next book, *Preface to Plato* (1963), that became influential. It relied on Milman Perry's thesis concerning oral traditions to argue that the difference between 5th and 4th century BC works reflected a cultural shift from oral to written culture, from "Homeric" associative and temporal thinking about particular things to a "Platonic" insistence on general static ideas. Just after its publication Havelock moved from Harvard to Yale.

3 "Let liberalism be done, let Plato perish" (61). The famous phrase Strauss echoes, "*Fiat justitia et pereat mundus*" ("Let justice be done and let the world perish") first appears in Johannes Manlius's *Loci Communes* (1563). The phrase was used by Kant, without the "et," in *Perpetual Peace*.

But the unchangeable standards to which he here refers are less clear, and are in fact indicated only incidentally in the course of the review.

Moreover, during the review's composition Strauss wrote the following to Seth Benardete:

I am reading Havelock's book on Greek liberalism. It is utterly contemptible on all possible grounds: religious, political, moral and scholarly; I say nothing of philosophic. I plan to write a 30-page article since this will give me an opportunity to elaborate some footnotes of *Natural Right and History*. Compared with this kind of "liberalism," Jaeger is a giant.⁴

The review thus has as its indirect purpose the elaboration of some points made in the footnotes to *Natural Right and History*, which Strauss had published four years earlier.

Since that book represented Strauss' most sustained address to-date of the work of Heidegger,⁵ it is not surprising that the review of Havelock proper is preceded and prepared by two paragraphs on positivism and existentialism, the two predominant schools of thought in our age which had according to Strauss rejected classical political philosophy as "obsolete" (27). The opening is an abbreviated sketch of the movement that a thoughtful adherent to positivism will necessarily make to existentialism, a movement that Strauss describes at greater length in his "Existentialism" essay on Heidegger.⁶ Strauss here notes that proponents of positivism oppose classical political philosophy on two grounds: that it is non-scientific in mode and that it is nondemocratic in substance. Since positivists claim that value judgments cannot be validated by science, however, positivism's opposition to what is "nondemocratic" is by its own lights a non-scientific opposition, as is the sympathy for a "certain kind of

4 Strauss to Benardete, September 22, 1958. Quoted in Patard (2014), 843n120. Strauss' reference in the letter to Benardete is to Werner Jaeger, author of *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, the first volume of which was published originally in German (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1934), and translated, with volumes two and three, into English by Gilbert Highet (1939, 1945, 1947). Strauss had attended Jaeger's courses in 1924–25, and as his correspondence with Klein makes clear (10 October 1939), he did not have a high opinion of his work.

5 Heidegger appears in the first chapter of *Natural Right and History* as "radical historicism," or "existentialist" historicism (32), in the final chapter as "existentialism" (321), and toward the middle of the book (176) as the unnamed last thinker in a line of thinkers, extending from Hobbes, who have attempted to enhance the status of man, a thinker who understands the "highest principle" as "the mysterious ground of 'History,'" a ground that, "being wedded to man and to man alone, is so far from being eternal that it is coeval with human history."

6 Strauss (1956), 308–11.

democracy" that one finds among positivism's practitioners. Strauss points in this way to the "dogmatism," or hidden premises, of positivism, a dogmatism it hides by loudly proclaiming its "skepticism."

But Strauss predicts that positivism will be "the last form in which modern rationalism appears," because it is "that form in which the crisis of modern rationalism becomes almost obvious to everyone" (390). He does not here elaborate on that crisis, but he has already suggested it: The alleged need to abstain from value judgments must, of course, be applied to modern science itself, which therefore cannot consistently claim (as it once claimed) to provide, through its rational results, guidance to human beings on the right way to act—that is, cannot claim that acting rationally or in accord with the findings of modern science is right or good. Positivism as value-free science has abandoned "the notion that man is a rational being who perverts his being if he does not act rationally."⁷ He to whom the crisis becomes obvious therefore abandons positivism and "if he adheres to the modern premises, he has no choice but to turn to existentialism," that is, to a school of thought at whose core, as Strauss says in his talk on existentialism,⁸ is Heidegger. And as he does in that talk, Strauss here presents existentialism as superior to positivism in its manifest willingness to face "the situation with which positivism is confronted but which it does not grasp: the fact that reason has become radically problematic"—that is, the inability of positivistic science to say that its practice and adherence to its findings are good or right for man, or its new, astonishing claim that the choice to act rationally is an unguided "free" choice, or is what existentialism calls a "decision" made over the abyss of freedom.

But if existentialism is, as this indicates, superior to positivism, any attempted return to classical political philosophy faces in existentialism a more serious opponent than it faces in positivism.⁹ For existentialism, too, finds classical political philosophy "obsolete," on three grounds. In elaborating these grounds Strauss stresses the religion-friendly and even mystical nature of existentialism. Its first ground against classical political philosophy is that the premises upon which it rests are "not evident." In fact, says the existentialist, "all thinking rests on unevident but non arbitrary premises," for "[m]an is in the grip of powers which he cannot master or comprehend, and these powers reveal themselves differently in different historical epochs." Second, classical political philosophy is "rationalist;" it claims indeed to be universal but it is unconsciously indebted to the historical community of Greeks that was not made

7 Strauss (1956), 308–09.

8 Strauss (1956), 304.

9 On this point see also Strauss (1959a), 26.

but “grew.” (Here Strauss silently alludes to the indebtedness of Heideggerian existentialism to the German Historical School of jurisprudence, which sought to ground justice in a notion of a nation’s sacred, organically grown tradition.) Third, “by denying the dependence of man’s thought on powers which he cannot comprehend, classical political philosophy was irreligious.” It recognized indeed the need for religion in political communities but it unjustifiably subordinated the religious to the political, making the priesthood “fifth and first,” for example, in Aristotle’s elaboration of offices (26–27).

Having in this way shown the greater willingness of existentialism to face the current situation of reason, and shown the movement from positivism to existentialism to be a movement toward an elevation of the religious disposition, Strauss turns to Havelock, whom he introduces as a “positivist” (and hence as representing a logical step backward from existentialism) and even as an adherent of an “obsolete version” of positivism. For while Havelock wishes to be non-judgmental, he still speaks of “savages” rather than (as a more current positivist would) of “pre-literate” men, and of “progress” rather than of (the morally neutral) “change.” The inconsistent, dated positivism of Havelock moves him to declare himself (proudly) a “liberal,” enabling Strauss to raise the question of what a liberal is and what it means to be a liberal today. But in the course of examining this question, and Havelock’s search for his pre-Socratic liberal counterparts half hidden or buried in classical texts, Strauss will not simply leave behind the other, more formidable critic of classical political philosophy, existentialism, which he has so forcefully and conspicuously drawn to our attention. In fact, his most serious purpose may be to bring into doubt the three-fold existentialist critique of classical political philosophy that he has presented, or to cause the premises of existentialism, “the modern premises,” to which, he implies, existentialists adhere, to be called into question.

The work has four sections, marked simply by an extra space between the paragraphs.¹⁰ The first and longest (26 to 41) lays out Havelock’s procedure and examines his attempt to demonstrate ancient liberals’ philosophy of history through his examination of Hesiod’s *Works and Days* and Plato’s *Laws*. A short second section (41–45) addresses how Havelock “begins to disinter Greek liberalism” by examining his account of Aeschelus’ *Prometheus*, Sophocles’ *Antigone*, and Diodorus Siculus’ histories. A third, long section (45–59) is devoted largely but not exclusively to Havelock’s interpretation of Plato’s *Protagoras*. The fourth section (59–64) addresses Havelock’s culminating argument on the political theory of the ancient liberals as disclosed in the

10 The section breaks in the original *Review of Metaphysics* article are present but less visible. Its four sections are these: pages 390 to 409, 409 to 415, 415 to 433, and 433 to 439.

fragments of the writings of the sophist Antiphon. We will go through each in turn.

1 Havelock's Liberalism

Strauss first sketches his understanding of the true classical liberal—the possessor of the virtues of a free man rather than those of a slave—as that liberal appears in the thought of Aristotle. This liberal comes to associate liberalism especially with freedom from stinginess or greed. Following Aristotle, Strauss suggests that this is a result of the gentleman dimly perceiving that there is an activity that is good in itself rather than for whatever monetary profit might come out of it: the mind's activity (28–9; cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 1334a–b). That activity represents man at his best and subject to no authority, and provides the basis for the authority to which all other human activities are, to the genuine liberal, indeed subject: That authority must “be a reflection through a dimming medium of what is highest,” and so cannot be tyrannical or despotic. The genuine classic liberal is republican and a gentleman. Strauss contrasts him with today's liberal, brought into being by modern political philosophy and described by Havelock. Today's liberal is the opposite of the classical liberal. He puts greater stress on liberty than on authority, which he understands as derived solely from society (consent). He denies fixed norms, finding all norms to be the response to historical needs and so changing as the “historical process” changes. Today's liberalism is “optimistic and radical,” democratic and egalitarian, and considers human characteristics to have been acquired through an historical process, by the pressures of groups. It is “‘a genuine humanism which is not guilt-ridden.’” It is “in full sympathy with technological society and an international commercial system.” It is pragmatic, scientific, non-theological and non-metaphysical (29). It is, one could say, deeply indebted to Hegelianism or “implies a philosophy of history” (33). And the picture Strauss thus paints of it shows us at once that it stands in opposition not only to what he has presented as authentic classic liberalism (“To quote Havelock . . . Plato is not a liberal thinker”) but likewise—especially in its guiltless commercial and technological humanism—to Heideggerian existentialism.

In at least one respect, however, Havelock appears to follow or parallel Heidegger. Unlike most contemporary liberals Havelock looks for a “pure” liberalism in pre-Platonic or pre-Socratic thought, on the assumption that the modern thinkers who are thought to be responsible for the rise of liberalism (Locke and Jefferson) remain, in their appeal to “nature” or to a non-negotiable “natural right,” under the influence of Plato and his metaphysical absolutism.

In his search for a pre-Socratic ancient liberal Havelock makes a newer, cruder version of an old claim (made by Hegel): the German Idealists stand to the French Revolution as Plato and Aristotle stand to the sophists. Unlike Hegel, however, Havelock takes the side of the sophists or pre-Socratics in the alleged fight between them and Plato and Aristotle. As we will see, Strauss quietly indicates that this fight is significantly overblown—that Plato and Aristotle are in some very important and overlooked respects in agreement with the pre-Socratics.

Everyone grants, Strauss argues, that there were pre-Socratic or pre-Platonic thinkers who were atheistic, materialist, and Epimethean, who recognized progress in the arts and inventions as having pulled humanity out of an originally “poor and brutish” beginning, and who held all morality to be of merely human origin. Strauss himself grants in addition that the pre-Platonic thinkers in question share this set of doctrines with modern liberals. What he denies is that this set of doctrines is “the sufficient condition of liberalism” (30–31). What, then, according to Strauss, is the needed addition?

Havelock himself does not say, or “never meets the issue” (32). Strauss finds the needed addition that produces liberalism in three related things. First, for the ancients, the specialty of the “special sort of animal,” man, is his capacity to “look at the universe or look up to it,” the recognition of which can “easily lead to the non-liberal conclusion that the distinctly human life is the life devoted to contemplation as distinguished from the life of action and production” (31). Second, the ancient thinkers did not lose sight of the fact that since the universe has come into being, it will perish, in an infinite repetition; “there were and there will be infinitely many universes.” The pre-Socratics’ “contemplation” of the whole, then, Strauss immediately makes clear, is not infused by any hope to overcome its inevitable decline. That contemplation is instead infused by a resignation to what Strauss in *Natural Right and History* had, following Lucretius, called the crackings of the walls of the world, a resignation accompanied by the recognition of the relative insignificance of human action and production. (The moderns, by contrast, from Hobbes to Hegel to Heidegger, constructed artificial blinders to hide from themselves the cracking of the walls of the world, thereby investing human life with much more significance than it has in itself.)¹¹ For this reason the ancients attached importance not so much to the progress of social institutions, which would inevitably decay, as to “understanding the permanent ground or character of the process or to the understanding of the whole within which the process takes place and which limits the progress” (32–33). What Havelock calls the “flamboyant optimism”

11 See Strauss (1953) 175–76.

of the modern liberals manages, by contrast, to be somehow unaffected by the inevitability of decline, which, as Strauss had emphasized in a note in *Natural Right and History*, should confront the moderns even in the findings of their own science.¹² Unlike the pre-Socratics, the modern liberal does not actually permit himself to see the inevitable decline and hence ultimate futility of all human deeds.

In the midst of articulating this second difference between modern liberals and their alleged ancient counterparts, Strauss raises a deeper question:

Here the question arises as to whether there can be a universe without man: is man's being accidental to the universe? In other words, is the state of things prior to the emergence of man and the other animals one state of the universe equal in rank to the state after their emergence, or are the two states fundamentally different from one another as *chaos* and *kosmos*? (31)

The modern liberals, Strauss argues, who find man's being to be accidental to the universe, accordingly find no significant difference between the two states of the universe (pre-human and human), and Strauss wonders if "their ancient predecessors—the 'Greek anthropologists'—agree[d] with them." His formulation implies that they did not, and that this disagreement is significant. Human being was for them not accidental to but necessary to any ordered whole or cosmos, which is to say that they understood the human mind and its perception to play a decisive role in the formation or being of that ordered whole (which, incidentally, can be the case only if there is no divine mind). And as Strauss indicates in *Natural Right and History* (32 and 176), the finitude of man and hence this question of the being of the cosmos without man is central also to the thinking of Heidegger. Is Heidegger, then, correct to seek among the pre-Socratics a kind of thinking closer to his own?

The third distinction that Strauss draws between the ancients and contemporary liberals indicates otherwise:

Finally, liberalism is empirical or pragmatic; it is therefore unable to assert that the principle of causality ("nothing can come into being out of nothing and through nothing") is evidently and necessarily true. On the other hand it would seem that the Greek anthropologists or rather "physiologists" did regard that principle as evidently true because they

12 See Strauss (1953) 175–76, including note 10 on 176, which contains quotations from Engels and Bachofen addressed to this question. See also 40, top, of Strauss (1968a).

understood the relation of sense perception and *logos* differently than do the liberals. (32)

Here a major difficulty for positivist science, upon which modern liberalism depends, comes into focus: positivist science cannot affirm the principle of causality; it can strictly speaking give us only observations. Strauss here traces this inability of the liberals' science to their doubt (starting with Descartes) of our sense perception of the given world—to the Cartesians' rejection of sense perception as providing a natural knowledge of the world as it is. The ancient "physiologists," by contrast, while breaking with the pre-philosophic life and pre-philosophic orientation—the orientation guided by law or custom—accepted the principle of causality (Cf. *Natural Right and History*, 89–90) because they did not reject pre-philosophic *knowledge* available through sense perception, a knowledge which as knowledge relies on that principle. (Sense perception shows us trees and rivers, for example, while it does not show us spirits and witches, even if specific human groups may *believe* them to exist.)¹³ This would mean, however, that the pre-Socratic physiologists in question, no less than Socratics, stand against Heidegger, according to whom all things come to be out of nothing and by nothing.¹⁴ We may therefore say that contra Heidegger, awareness of mortality and recognition of the central role of the thinking being, man, in the being of the cosmos, which as Strauss has already shown, characterized the thinkers in question, does not dispel or bring into question the fundamental tenet of all philosophy—Socratic or pre-Socratic—that no being emerges without a cause.

That which does drive Heidegger to assert that all things come into being out of nothing and through nothing is, Strauss suggests in *Natural Right and History*, Heidegger's unquestioned *historicism*, that is, his belief in history as a "dimension of reality" that had allegedly "escaped classical thought."¹⁵ Havelock's liberalism, too, assumes "history" as a "'dimension of reality'" (33), and Havelock is eager to find belief in it or awareness of it among the ancient thinkers whom he wishes to call liberal. As Strauss brings out, Havelock can do so only at the expense of philological discipline: Havelock translates words

13 See Strauss' "Note on 'Some Critical Remarks on Man's Science of Man,'" December 26, 1945. Typed manuscript with 9 numbered pages. Leo Strauss Papers, Box 14, Folder 9, p. 6. Patard 2014, 579. (The "Note" is an unpublished manuscript review of Kurt Riezler's "Some critical remarks on man's science of man," which had appeared in *Social Research* 1945, 481–505).

14 See Strauss (1970) 327–29.

15 Strauss (1953) 33.

for "becoming" or "all human things" as "History," distorting the text in his own image. But Havelock's broader case for the existence of ancient historicism is that his ancient "liberals" were conscious that moral beliefs changed over the course of a humane progress from imperfect beginnings, while their religiously orthodox and Platonic opponents held to belief in a perfect, Edenic or golden, first age that was lost through guilt. What for Nietzsche had been the catastrophic awareness of the historical relativity of all values is to Havelock a ground for optimism, held by both ancient and modern liberals, and so the basis of a progressive moral crusade against conservatives ancient and modern. By examining Havelock's argument concerning perfect versus imperfect beginnings—a subject to which Strauss called his readers' attention on a number of other occasions¹⁶ and one that will become a theme of this essay—Strauss addresses more fully the issue of historicism, and so the true ground of Heidegger's opposition to ancient science and its principle of causality.

Havelock begins his search for the ancient historicism with Hesiod. He reads Hesiod's account of the five races of men as a tale of successive failures and woe told by "an ageing conservative . . . who cannot come to terms with . . . changing conditions." Strauss certainly does not, as some of his critics would lead one to expect, defend Plato and Aristotle and an unchanging morality against this progressivist attack. He instead notes that Hesiod's account of the five ages is much more complex than Havelock's reading allows: Only three of the five human races—the silver, bronze, and iron races—are failures, and they did not fail on account of human guilt but instead began to decline from the golden race (as Havelock himself notes elsewhere) when Zeus dethroned Kronos; Zeus, not man, is responsible for the failures. Moreover, the race of heroes, made by Zeus, coming as it does between the bronze and the iron ages, represents an ascent, not a decline, and the next race after our iron age will likely also be an ascent. Hesiod appears to teach not decline upon decline, but that better and worse races of men follow indefinitely one after another, until the end of the age of Zeus (35).

But Strauss does not leave it at refuting Havelock's claim that Hesiod regarded "History as Regress." As he will many times in this essay (see 35, 36, 40, 47, 49, 52, 55, 58) he invites his reader to consider "the context," specific and general, of the passages under consideration, in order to develop a more adequate reading of the text under consideration. This too may surprise those who have been led by Strauss' critics to expect a disregard of contexts. In fact,

16 Strauss (1964) especially 38–9 and 129; Strauss (1953) especially 83–4, 95–7, 150n24; Strauss (1967) especially 155; Strauss (1952b); Strauss (1968b) especially 84, 86, 97, 100, 116–17, 122, 131; Strauss (1943) especially 114, 139–41.

however, Strauss (and his better students) consider context more carefully than almost any other readers. Where they differ from most contemporary interpreters is in their assumption that truly great thinkers are not determined in their thinking by the opinions that reign in their time, but are able to transcend those opinions (their “cave”) in a manner that can be seen only when the context, and the permanent contextual need to pay lip service to those opinions, is recognized. In this case the immediate context is three Hesiodic tales, of which the tale of the five races of man is the second. The tale of the five races is sandwiched between the tale of Prometheus and Pandora, on one hand—in which work is presented as a curse—and the tale of the hawk and the nightingale, on the other. Calling the latter tale “very pertinent to the history of Greek liberalism,” Strauss explains its teaching as follows: The hawk, that is, the king, tells the nightingale, that is, the singer, that he who resists the stronger is a fool, doomed to suffer pain and disgrace; yet the king is unaware that the nightingale has a power of its own.

As Strauss’ subsequent account of the “broad context” of the poem brings out, the power of the singer—of Hesiod—rests in part on his capacity to hide his critique of the king—that is, of Zeus the king—from most of his listeners. The “works and days” of men chronicled by Hesiod are accordingly preceded by “exhortation to work as the only proper thing for just men and as a blessing, by answers to the question as to why the gods compel men to work, and by the praise of Zeus the king, the guardian of justice . . .” This surface teaching, according to which there are two ways of life, that of unjust idlers and that of just workers, conceals a teaching that appears on “closer inspection.” According to this more muted teaching there are three ways of life or kinds of men: those who understand by themselves, those who listen to and obey the former, and those who do neither. The singer is the highest example of the first way of life or kind of man. He does not work (and so does not belong to the righteous) nor is he idle (and so does not belong to the unjust), but has a kind of activity that “transcends” both and that “belongs to the night.” His activity must transcend both because work is not in truth simply a blessing but is also “toil,” the “brother of forgetting,” while “the Muses are the daughters of Memory.” The suggestion of Strauss is that Hesiod, the singer who understands, is philosophic, in search of the truly oldest or first things, aided in this search by what he poetically calls the Muses, who “are indispensable for knowledge of the things that shall be and of the things that were in the olden times as well as of the gods who are always.” Hesiod’s highest theme is “Zeus” as the (popular) alternative to the genuine first things.¹⁷

17 37. As for the “philosophic” character of Hesiod’s understanding, consider what Strauss says concerning the Muses’ possible instruction of “the men of the age of Kronos” and

Havelock misses all of this because he is "too certain of his answers to all questions," especially those provided by contemporary psychology and sociology (36b), or as Strauss also suggests, because he is amusic and unable to perceive ambiguity. At any rate Strauss states that a wiser beginning than Havelock's attempt to interpret Hesiod would have been a consideration of the "nonmusic and unambiguous discussion of the problem of progress which we find in the second book of Aristotle's *Politics*" (37, bottom), that is, the final part of the discussion of Hippodamus of Miletus's scheme of honoring citizens for innovations (*Politics* 1268b22–1269a27). Strauss' formulation of Aristotle's position brings out how well disposed is the alleged anti-liberal Aristotle to progress in the arts and sciences: Aristotle assumes "as a fact that the change from the old manner in the arts and sciences to the new manner has been beneficial." He simply "wonders whether a corresponding change in the laws would be equally beneficial," or he questions "whether there is a necessary harmony between intellectual progress and social progress." There is certainly *some* such harmony for Aristotle—since all humans seek not the ancestral but the good—but "his answer is not unqualifiedly in the affirmative." The apparent tendency of such thinkers as Hesiod and Aristotle to "look backward" arises, it seems, not from any irrational conservative motives but from a limit their reason perceives to "social progress," both "after and before the emergence of science" (37). But what, then, is that limit?

The subsequent few paragraphs, on Plato's *Statesman* and its myth of the ages of man (37–8) suggests an answer, or rather make clearer the answer that Strauss has already pointed to. The Eleatic Stranger, the "philosopher" who describes those ages, says "disconcertingly" of the only age of which we have knowledge by perception—that is, the present age—that "there is in it no divine providence, no care for men." The former ages are known only by "hearsay" or myth; of the first, the age of Kronos, it is said that gods took care of men, but it is hard to know if men were happy then, since it is unknown if they used their leisure to philosophize rather than to mythologize. The reader is "compelled" by this argument of the Eleatic Stranger, Strauss says, to raise the question of whether there could be philosophy when there was (under divine care) no need for arts, hence no arts, hence no genuine knowledge of what it means to know something, or of "what philosophy is" (38). Havelock is

of the present (iron) age (37), together with this remark, in the next section, on Plato's *Statesman*: "the question of whether men led a blessed life under Kronos, when the gods took care of men, is left unanswered on the ground that we do not know whether men then used their freedom from care for philosophizing... Hesiod compelled us to raise a similar question regarding the golden age" (38). See also Strauss' letter to Jacob Klein, dated October 10, 1939 in Meier 2001, 581–82, translated in Patard (2014), 21–3.

thus correct to say that Plato's Socrates considers the arts second in rank, but as all of this makes clear, that is a "high rank." Strauss adds that if Plato's Eleatic Stranger speaks of the arts as divine gifts, as Havelock complains, he does so only momentarily. "Plato," says Strauss, "admits in the myth of the *Statesman* the imperfect character of man's beginnings." As this indicates, "Socrates" has not been given this whole argument, but it is the argument of "Plato." The limit to social progress would seem then to be tied to the need of most human beings to reject this in favor of belief in divine providence. Or (as Aristotle suggests in the *Politics*) social progress is limited by the law's lack of a *rational* hold on man—by the fact that law derives its strength from habituation, especially, we may add, from the as it were natural habituation of most human beings toward belief in divine providence.

This is born out in the sequel, in which Strauss turns with Havelock to a passage in Plato's *Laws*. Here the story of the age of abundance under Kronos is again told, as a way to show men of the present that "not men but a god, or the immortal mind within us, must rule over men if the city is to be happy." That is, Plato's Athenian Stranger suggests that one need not long for the age of Kronos since it is possible to achieve it now, with the rule of the human mind. And as Strauss notes, Plato's more thematic account of the first age presents it as the age of men who survived a cataclysm, not as an age of men ruled by Kronos, and of men who are moreover initially praised highly but are said to be lacking in wisdom or prudence and therefore inferior to the best of later men, that is, philosophers. Eventually these men of the first age are even said to have been savages and cannibals. The Athenian Stranger's account does indeed, as Havelock complains, include a limit to human inventions or "history," but that is a rational inference rather than evidence of prejudice; the "liberal's science" should tell Havelock the same thing (39–40).

Strauss concludes the first section by noting that Havelock is right to assert that the net effect "on the imagination" of reading the archeology of Book Three of the *Laws* is to see early human life as a "wholly admirably and happy thing," and that this effect is contradicted by Plato himself. Strauss argues that the reason is however not, as Havelock would have it, Plato's desire to avoid an open fight with the alleged ancient liberals. It is instead the following: "Plato knew that most men read more with their 'imagination' than with open-minded care and are therefore much more benefited by salutary myths than by the naked truth" (40). Havelock himself cites Protagoras' awareness that insights such as the human origin of morality are an invaluable acquisition, a heritage for later men that "'must never be lost' or 'is too precious to be gambled with.'" Strauss implicitly agrees with Havelock that morality, if not indeed "historical," is of "human origin," and that this insight is a valuable part of the heritage of

civilization. Where he disagrees is in his assessment of who constitutes the enemies of civilization. Strauss finds the greatest of them to be not the "narrow but loyal preservers" of civilization, but rather those who through contempt for the past "squander the heritage." The latter, rootless futurists, would destroy the rootedness needed by civilization and would thus "bring back the initial chaos and promiscuity" (41). While this statement sounds (and is doubtless meant to sound) like that of an alarmist conservative, it has the less obvious but deeper purpose of confirming not only Plato's but Strauss' agreement with Havelock on the important matter of the *chaotic* character of man's beginnings. He insists, on account of this very awareness, however, that the "first duty of civilized man is to respect the past," a duty that leads one to elevate the "Founding Fathers" and the aged, and hence logically to the "belief in perfect beginnings or in the age of Kronos."¹⁸ Fully aware of the ramifications of their discoveries concerning early man, and therefore without hope in any saving power, be it gods or History, to preserve civilization, the most radical thinkers employ the "Muses," or appeal to the imagination of readers, to sustain the conservative myths that sustain civilization, in a manner that accords with the needs of most human beings.

What, then, has Strauss' initial argument disclosed concerning not only Havelock but Heideggerian existentialism? The latter is what one is led to from positivism, according to Strauss, if one "adheres to the modern premises." A key "modern premise," clearly assumed by Havelock but assumed no less by Heidegger, is that the findings of philosophers have always been, and ought to be, made apparent to everyone. This premise causes Havelock, and perhaps likewise Heidegger, to disdain those thinkers who to him *appear* unable to live with the thoughts that there is no divine or eternal order to the whole, that our beginnings were imperfect, and that morality is of human origin. Heidegger's analysis of classical thought, at least in his early years, was of course infinitely more impressive than that of Havelock. Yet it was limited, no less than Havelock's, by a failure to see the accommodations that classical philosophers and poets, Socratic and pre-Socratic, were making on the surface of their works to the reigning religious orthodoxies of their times. This failure made it easier for Heidegger to be given over to the reigning modern orthodoxy according to which thinkers are determined by their historical situation, by "History," or by the disclosure of Being peculiar to their age. To him, the Platonic or Aristotelean philosophers were unable to accept "flux," or were engaged in a desperate flight from their mortality, an intellectual flight from the decay and

18 40-1. Compare Strauss (1953) 83b-84t.

death that *time* entails.¹⁹ Strauss has made as clear as circumstances permit how mistaken a view of Socratic or Platonic philosophy this is.

2 Disinterring Greek Liberalism: Aeschylus and Sophocles

The short second section of Strauss' essay (41–5) is devoted to Havelock's comments on three passages taken from the three major Greek tragedians who allegedly possessed a "progressivist view" and thus a "scientific anthropology." According to Havelock, Aeschylus' *Prometheus* drastically "corrects" Hesiod's "scheme": Prometheus' philanthropic theft of fire saved man from the tyrant Zeus and allowed man to learn all of the arts and thus rescue himself by means of "understanding," or by his own achievement, from his pre-human and not divinely created condition; technology also allowed him to save himself and fellows, compassionately, from liquidation by the tyrant Zeus. Aeschylus is even a "progressive evolutionist," who, by presenting an eventual reconciliation of Zeus and Prometheus, shows future progress to be infinite (41). To make this case, Havelock resorts to what would today be called a Straussian reading: "‘on the surface of the drama’ Prometheus is a god, but if the fire that he brings is, as the play suggests, the true teacher of the arts for man, then the arts are ‘to some extent man’s own achievement’ (41–2).

Strauss finds this argument "reasonable," but asks what, then, Prometheus' achievement is, or what he stands for. Havelock's answer is "Intelligence." To this conjecture Strauss objects that Prometheus claims to have put "blind hopes" in men "as a remedy for having made them stop to foresee their doom, their death." Prometheus further claims to have invented a medicine that would cause man to think that he has abolished man's mortality. "Is he a boaster?" Strauss asks. He points again, that is, to how crucial to classical judgment of intelligence versus foolishness is a full awareness of mortality, or how far from intelligence are the blind hopes that hide this awareness. Havelock, for his part, appears to have such hopes. For as Strauss goes on to argue, Aeschylus' Prometheus has in fact learned that art is "far weaker than necessity." And this means that (contrary to Havelock's hopes and reading) "there is . . . no infinite progress." Human death, and mortality more generally, limit progress. Since Prometheus comes to this knowledge only late in Aeschylus' play, Strauss is moved to say of him that "the well-meaning bringer of blind hopes was himself the victim of a blind hope." The punished Prometheus comes to regret having chosen to side with Zeus over Kronos. Aeschylus causes us to wonder, though,

19 See Heidegger (1946).

as had Hesiod, whether Zeus is not wiler than Prometheus, teaching man "to learn wisdom by suffering . . . and not through the arts."

But as he had done in the examination of Hesiod, so does Strauss in this examination of Aeschylus proffer not merely a rebuttal but his own alternative reading, on the basis of a consideration of the broader context of the play (42–43). It is the first play of a trilogy, he notes, and Zeus, the great Prometheus' antagonist, does not appear in it, perhaps as a tribute to his greater wisdom: he *appears* as a tyrant before he can fully manifest himself or his plan. Even Zeus' desire to destroy the "witless" race of men created by Kronos contains a praise of Zeus. Only Prometheus' theft of fire gave man wits, after all, and it is possible that Zeus had intended to create a race of men "worthy of him and free of blind hopes." He instead now uses Prometheus' kind but non-promethean or non-foreseeing deed in a "foreseeing, in a royal manner." He decides to use man's new power as a means to teach him wisdom through the suffering that comes from the arts.

Strauss concludes his alternative reading by stressing, over and against Havelock's esoteric reading, the need to dwell "on the surface of the play" rather than moving too quickly to find a concealed meaning in it. He thus may be said to provide a corrective for the type of investigation that he had recommended in the opening section on Hesiod. In any event, Aeschylus' change of Hesiod's story is due not, as Havelock would have it, to a "scientific source" of information concerning the human origin of the arts (for which, Strauss points out, one could much more easily credit the arch-Edenic biblical account—he has in mind especially Genesis 4:17–24) but to a "somewhat different meditation on things divine-human."²⁰

The second portion of a poetic work Havelock adduces to show the influence of science consists of lines, delivered by the chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone*, listing the most outstanding inventions of the awful or wondrous being, man. Havelock notes that the figure of Prometheus has here "disappeared," which Strauss agrees would demonstrate Havelock's thesis were it the case that unscientific man is unable to be aware "of the human origin of the human arts;" he adduces a passage from Plato's *Laws* (677d4) to demonstrate that this is not so. So too Havelock presents a passage of Euripides' *Suppliants* as evidence of a pious, "skillful re-write" of a "scientific original," but Strauss notes that there is no actual evidence of the alleged original. Havelock's only possible evidence is that Euripides contradicts himself by "theistically" praising the kindness of heaven but "nontheistically" blaming heaven's harshness. Against this

20 For Strauss' reflections on Aristophanes' account, in the *Frogs*, of Aeschylus' thoughtful conservatism in divine matters, see Strauss (1966) 251 bottom–253.

Strauss cites the words of the play itself: not Euripides but one of his characters, Theseus, says that a god “taught man to protect himself against . . . another god.” Yet Havelock “knows that Euripides speaks in the person of Theseus.” For a second time, Strauss cites the surface teaching over and against an alleged deeper but in fact purely conjectural teaching.

Havelock appears to be on firmer ground in his survey of the work of Diodorus Siculus, who after all, as Strauss points out, was an “authority for Machiavelli and Hobbes,” and gave a coherent, naturalistic account of the origin of the universe and of man, one that accords with what Havelock considers a “philosophy of history.” Havelock’s error in this case is one of omission: he mentions that according to Diodorus “the universe and man have come into being,” but Strauss points out that for Diodorus it is “equally important” (and deadly to the thesis of a progressive history) “that they will perish,” a fact from which Havelock seems again to have averted his eyes. Havelock claims among other things that Diodorus’ following of an Egyptian account according to which the arts are gifts of certain gods is “an Egyptian fairy tale” that should be regarded as “a sort of parody.” We again are presented with an apparent “Straussian” reading by Havelock, and with a rebuff of it by Strauss. He notes that Havelock raises the question of “why in antiquity it was so difficult for [the scientific] anthropologies to survive in their own stark scientific honesty”—or why Diodorus would in the present case use a “fairy tale” instead of speaking the truth—but “we are not aware that he even tried to answer this question, although Diodorus is not silent about the usefulness of myths of untrue stories of a certain kind” (44). Strauss, that is, does not question Havelock’s description of Diodorus’ account of the rise of the divine origin of the arts as a “fairy tale,” or as something Diodorus knew to be untrue. He simply notes that Havelock shows no serious reflection on this practice of not telling the truth, and even ignores an author’s own statements on the matter. The practice in question changed, Strauss notes, with the rise of modern over ancient “naturalism.” The former is allied with “popular enlightenment,” the latter conceives of the relation between science and society on “entirely different terms” (44–45). Strauss’ second section confirms, that is, what we had found to be the case in the first section.

Strauss concludes this second section with a broad judgment of Havelock’s procedure: The existence of the alleged scientific sources of the tragedians’ words has never been established, so Havelock’s claim that there were such sources for Plato (against which Plato allegedly fought mightily and contradicted himself) and such sources for the tragedians, has been left as an unproven assumption, justified in Havelock’s opinion, Strauss speculates, by

"some" unknown "people." Strauss thus concludes that Havelock has provided an "involuntary satire on the scientific method and on scientific progress."

3 **Reconstructing the Anthropologists' Teaching: *Protagoras* and *Republic***

As important as the arguments thus far have been, Strauss indicates that the heart of his case against Havelock's thesis appears in the long, third section, on Plato's *Protagoras* (45–59). Following others, Havelock finds in this dialogue both "the anthropology and the political theory of the Greek liberals," and Havelock's "whole thesis depends" on his reading of this dialogue. Strauss does not, however, devote this third section exclusively to Havelock's analysis of the *Protagoras*. Instead, after indicating its importance, he devotes the opening portion (45–49t) to Havelock's initial examination of the *Protagoras* and to Havelock's account of the city of sows in the *Republic* (49–50), both of which are a continuation of Havelock's attempt to prove the existence of "naturalistic sources" in Plato's work. This is followed by a look at Havelock's turn to the fragments of the alleged progressivist philosophers, or proponents of a "philosophy of history": Anaximander, Xenophanes, Archelaus, and Democritus. This is followed in turn by Havelock's account of his Greek liberals' political doctrine as disclosed in the writings of Democritus, undocumented utterances, and Antiphon (51b–53). Finally, Strauss returns in this third section to Havelock's direct and full interpretation of the *Protagoras*, which Havelock undertakes when he confronts the fact that his Greek liberals known chiefly through Plato are described by Plato as "sophists." Strauss goes out of his way to make this third section a section on "Protagoras" and to highlight its importance.

Havelock faces the initial problem that Protagoras is a character in a Platonic dialogue, his speech a creation of Plato. How can one distinguish what belongs authentically to Protagoras from what is a Platonic import? To Havelock, though, who is confident that he knows "which teachings are peculiarly Platonic (or Socratic)," this poses little difficulty; he easily subtracts the obvious Platonic import in order to produce the Protagorean original. At the outset, then, Strauss calls attention to Havelock's innocent assumption that he knows the thought of Plato. How mistaken this is comes to light immediately: Havelock takes Protagoras' common sense account of the differences between species of animals, especially between humans and brutes, as "Platonic" and "wholly incompatible with 'previous Greek science,'" which

emphasized “‘process’” over essential distinctions. But as Strauss points out, Protagoras, telling a myth—a popular tale—simply makes use of popular or everyday distinctions of “races or tribes of living beings,” distinctions made moreover by the Biblical redactors and by Empedocles and Democritus, who certainly were not under Platonic or Socratic influence (46–7). The Platonic Protagoras himself even uses later on in the dialogue the doctrine of essential differences between and within species and parts of living beings *against* Socrates, in order to “show the relativity or the ‘multi-colored’ character of the good.” Havelock attempts to explain away this Protagorean use by claiming that Protagoras refers only to classification of acts or performances by men in different situations, which draws Strauss to point out that classifications require classes, and the Platonic Protagoras in the passage in question classifies “useful things” according to a classification of beings or parts of beings to which they are useful. (Protagoras argues that manure, for example, is good for the roots of trees, but not for their branches.) Moreover, even the famous Protagorean teaching that “man is the measure of all things” (cf. *Theatetus* 152a–c, 161b–c, 169d–172b) assumes a difference in kind between man and the brutes. Finally, Strauss makes what we might call the case that Havelock, had he known what he was looking for, could have made: the “species” of mortal beings to which the Platonic Protagoras refers (in his myth), as primarily mixtures of earth and fire, do not possess “natures” or essential properties. Their natures are, rather, the “powers” they have, which “are secondary and derivative,” and hence “naturalistic” in Havelock’s desired sense. On this “crucial point” Socratic thinking, Strauss suggests, considers by contrast the nature of the thing to be visible and primary, and in contrast to the sophist, does *not* claim to know the primary things or principles out of which things are mixed.

Havelock likewise considers the references to the gods made by the “complete agnostic” Protagoras to be a Platonic element of his speech, made manifest as such by the “contradiction” in it between saying that all animals were molded by the gods and saying that man (alone) has kinship with the gods. Strauss points out that this kinship is said to be with “the god” (singular), and comes about according to Protagoras “not through Zeus’ gift of right, but through Prometheus’ theft of fire and technical wisdom from Hephaestus and Athena.” That is, the kinship is related to a technical wisdom obtained through a theft, or a rebellion against the gods (and perhaps in favor of intelligence). Had Havelock again merely interpreted the myth, he would easily have arrived at the expression of the “‘naturalistic,’ non-theistic doctrine or ‘creed’” he was seeking (47).

But why did Protagoras use a myth at all in addition to using prosaic speech? The context of the myth’s use suggests, Strauss argues, that Plato’s Protagoras

was "aware that he was in some danger in Athens since he was engaged in an unpopular activity, in the activity of a sophist." Or as Strauss will later say, Socrates succeeded in making him fully aware of this danger and hence in making him cautious. Strauss even suggests that the Platonic Protagoras' "keen sense of danger" makes concealment and frankness a central theme of the dialogue. Protagoras announces that he is the first open or uncloseted sophist because he did not think his closeted sophistic predecessors were in fact cautious in their attempt at concealment. That is, his openness is driven by or in the service of caution; caution is the principle. He will therefore be less than open when he considers it cautious to be so. Strauss draws our attention to one of these precautionary measures: the professed "agnostic" (who had famously begun a book declaring that he did not know whether the gods were or not) declares that " 'under God, I shall not suffer anything terrible on account of my professing to be a sophist'" (47).

In the course of elaborating what he calls the "third clue" concerning the reason Protagoras speaks in myth, Strauss not only points to the deepest reason for this Protagorean caution, but also to a commonality between Plato and Protagoras in this matter, and to a corresponding fundamental difference between the two ancients and Havelock. It concerns the status of the moral life. The "fundamental difference" that Plato's Protagoras presents between "the arts and reverence or right" is mythically presented in the following way: the various arts, practiced variously by individuals, are the result of Prometheus' necessary theft, whereas reverence and right are the "gift of Zeus" and to some extent practiced—that is, at least claimed to be—by everyone, universally. The non-mythical version of this account of the "origin and validity of morality" that is given by Plato's Protagoras is that reverence and right are "taught" by punishment and praise, or by what Havelock would call "social compulsion" or "conditioning." Unlike the arts, they are not taught by any appeal to reason. Havelock himself appears to be content with this, except that he fails to see the radical conclusion to be drawn from it: all right is conventional, or as Strauss puts it here, it produces in thinking men no more than "conformism or lip service." That Havelock is insensitive to the ramifications of this Strauss makes clear by the "few touches of his own" that Havelock adds to Protagoras' argument: Plato's Protagoras says "that the man who does not pretend to be just, whether he is unjust or not, is insane," to which Havelock adds "unless, it is surely implied, in temporary repentance" (48). Yet nothing of the sort is implied by Plato's Protagoras. Like Freud, in other words, whom he sometimes cites (see 36b with 63), Havelock is unable to accept the consequence of conventionalism. His confusion in this regard is made the more evident when Strauss cites Havelock's "remarkable...enthusiasm" for the Platonic Protagoras'

teaching that punishment makes sense only “as a corrective or as a deterrent,” that is, not as vengeance or retribution. Havelock appears to be unaware that this is the view also of “the illiberal Plato,” or is what Strauss calls “the rational view of punishment,” resting, we might add, in the case of Plato on the Socratic claim, made toward the end of the *Protagoras*, that virtue is knowledge and hence vice ignorance. As we will soon see, Strauss traces Havelock’s disposition to the loss, through the modern liberal’s faith in “history,” of the distinction between what is by nature and what is by convention. But this will entail the (post-Hegelian) modern liberal’s acceptance of the law as in effect natural.

Strauss finds a similar difficulty in Havelock’s interpretation of the city of sows in Book Two of the *Republic*: the contradictions one finds in it are the deliberate contradictions of the speaker, and not the result of Plato’s struggle with an imaginary naturalistic source. The first of a series of cities in speech imagined by the interlocutors is sufficient according to nature to satisfy bodily needs or the non-competitive society of humans but one that “cannot produce human excellence: it is a city of pigs” (50).

This completes Strauss’ look at Havelock’s attempt to show the *existence* of progressivist Greek philosophers by examining their alleged “use or adulteration by the tragedians, Diodorus of Siculus, and Plato.”²¹ It does not quite complete his look at Havelock’s account of the “philosophy of history” allegedly held by such progressivists. For this, Strauss turns to Havelock’s case made on the basis of late reports on Anaximander, fragments from Xenophanes, Anaxagoras, Archelaus, and Democritus (50–51). In all cases Havelock is shown to establish his points by selectively choosing fragments that seem to support his thesis and suppressing others that refute it, by avoiding reference to key parts of the thinkers’ doctrines (such as Xenophanes’ denial of any coming into being, or Anaxagoras’ reference to the ordering Intelligence), by diluting the distinction (in Archelaus) between nature and convention (according to which the just and the base are by convention and not by nature), by ignoring the same concern (in Democritus) with what is by nature and what is merely by law or convention (such as the benefits of rearing of children), and by the use of amusingly tendentious translations.

Strauss then turns to Havelock’s account of the alleged Greek liberals’ *political* doctrine, which Havelock finds in Democritus, in undocumented utterances, and in Antiphon. He limits himself here to arguments about

21 Strauss signals, that is, that he might well have introduced his section break here rather than with the introduction of Havelock’s look at the *Protagoras*. He appears thereby to signal the importance of the *Protagoras* not only for Havelock’s thesis but for his refutation of it.

Democritus' political teaching (leaving Havelock's examination of Antiphon's political teaching for the fourth and final section of his essay). Havelock would turn Democritus into a value-free, descriptive scientist; to do so, he ignores statements that show clearly that Democritus was not a relativist but thought the good and the true (whatever they are) were the same for all men. Havelock likewise assumes a knowledge of context that we do not possess. Finally, he grants over-the-top praise to a statement about the good that is said to follow when the powerful take heart to help the poor, a statement that he considers without parallel in "better-known classical thinkers," not remembering, as Strauss puts it, similar passages from Plato's *Laws* or Aristotle's *Politics* and moved by "inordinately strong prejudices and the ferocity that goes with such prejudices" to make an assertion that exhibits "the complete absence of a sense of proportion," just as Democritus' arguments in favor of natural rulers do not lead Havelock to consider that Democritus might have held laws to be a "bad afterthought" (52–3). The fury and incapacity of the many to understand arguments, which had so concerned Protagoras and others, has curiously shifted, in late modernity, to intellectuals, or one could say that modern intellectuals like Havelock actually belong, as Strauss has suggested, to the many (see 47b–48t).

Having in this way drawn our attention to the issue of the concealment of disconcerting ancient doctrines and their ramifications from a potentially ferocious many, over and against the moral ferocity of their modern proponents, Strauss turns back to the *Protagoras*. For while Havelock "rightly states" or "rightly suggests" or "rightly wonders," etc. (53–4) about the fairness of a number of points in Plato's presentation of the sophists, he must make an effort to understand "by itself" this dialogue, the "Platonic evidence" of liberalism that has permitted him, on the basis of a few fragments of pre-Socratics, to claim that there was indeed a "Greek liberalism."

Strauss' attention to the *Protagoras* shows us in general that Havelock's ax-grinding on behalf of liberalism and against what he takes to be Plato's presentation of the sophists leads him away from the kind of reflection on the text and what it is actually saying that would yield liberating insight. For starters, the second scene of the dialogue (the early morning conversation between Hippocrates and Socrates) and Socrates' introduction of Hippocrates to Protagoras in the opening of the third scene, indicate to the reader that Protagoras has an appeal for a certain type of ambitious young man. By contrast, Hippocrates has Socrates as a comrade yet would never dream of studying with him, and Socrates would similarly never take him on as a student (though he does, philanthropically or justly, protect the poor lad from Protagoras by demonstrating Protagoras' deficiency in good counsel to Hippias: 58, bottom), since Hippocrates lacks the requisite "nature" to philosophize. That philosophic

nature—one that craves clarity and awakens—is as other Platonic dialogues stress, rare, and there is no “teaching” anyone’s way to it. (And this, in truth, is what is meant by Socrates’ claim, here in the *Protagoras* and elsewhere, that virtue cannot be taught.) Yet simply because he is wealthy, Hippocrates is acceptable to Protagoras. “The place occupied in Socrates’ thought by “nature” is taken in Protagoras’ thought by “wealth” (which is by convention). Havelock resembles Protagoras in being unaware of this difference between Socrates and Protagoras. He is too busy justifying Protagoras’ charging of a fee to notice what Strauss calls “the decisive point” (54–5). If Protagoras is any indication, the sophists, unlike their closeted pre-Socratic forebearers, are guided less by nature than by convention.

Havelock likewise complains that Plato has transferred Protagoras’ claim about teaching political virtue into a non-political context. Strauss brings out how deeply political the context remains: Socrates “tactfully draws [Protagoras’] attention to the fact that in Athens ‘rich and poor’ are supposed to possess the political skill which Protagoras claims to teach.” And Protagoras’ use of myth and then of *logos*, the first unqualifiedly praising democracy and the second adding a significant qualification, shows the reader that Protagoras took Socrates’ hint, or that Protagoras is indeed cautious. Havelock, missing this point altogether, simply declares that the continuity of the *logos* with the myth “is tenuous,” thereby suggesting without realizing it that Protagoras “is a very great bungler.” Here and only here, in a defense of Protagoras, does Strauss permit himself to be blunt: “this suggestion is wrong.”²² While there is, as Strauss has already brought out, a difficulty that Plato would have us see in Protagoras’ understanding, only a “very great bungler” would fail to recognize the need, in this political situation, for mythologizing to complement his *logos*. Protagoras’ non-mythological or qualified praise of democracy brings out that there are wealthy people in it who can afford the expensive education of a Protagoras and so, Strauss pointedly adds, the “education in that political art which he claims to supply.” That education is not universal but only for the wealthy; it is quite distinct from the training in the universal reverence and justice supplied by the “gift of Zeus.” Despite Havelock’s attempts to claim that Protagoras is a “craftsman of democracy,” Protagoras is in fact a teacher of would-be oligarchs. “[H]e takes the side of the wealthy, whereas Socrates takes

22 The blunt judgment is all the more remarkable in that, as the transcript to Strauss’ 1956 class on the *Protagoras* shows, Strauss considered Protagoras’ myth and even his very choosing of a myth to have been “inept,” since it leaves Protagoras claiming that the political art or virtue is universally taught (by the “gift of Zeus”) and hence leaves no need for Protagoras’ own teaching of the political art.

the side of the gentlemen," those whom Strauss had early indicated to be the true ancient liberals owing to their perception, however dim, that the highest life is one of understanding for its own sake (28b–29t).

In the course of his initial long speech Protagoras mentions that laws are or should be not just any laws but "the invention of good and ancient lawgivers" (326d5–6). Havelock notices this but according to Strauss does not stress it enough, nor the awareness that it indicates of the need for reverence for antiquity. He suggests that the reason is that Havelock is preoccupied with why, according to Protagoras, there is such a need: original man, prior to the civilizing work of those lawgivers, were or are savages. Plato finally "‘here lets the liberals have their say undiluted,'" Havelock remarks, taking Protagoras' statement as "almost like a piece of Plato's own self-criticism." Was Plato or his Socrates, then, as this suggests, unaware that "in the beginning human beings were worse than the worst criminals living in civilized society"? Strauss has already indicated to us, toward the end of his initial look at the *Protagoras* (48–49t), that this was not at all the case. Is there then another reason why Socrates, as Protagoras has come to realize, looks down on "that political art which Protagoras claims to teach and of which he claims that every man possess it"?—that is, the "socialization" in pain and praise, mythologically called "the gift of Zeus," through which human beings have become concerned with justice and that Protagoras' oligarchic teachings, no less than the democratic ones, assume? According to Strauss, there is: Protagoras and the modern liberal Havelock share an unawareness "of the existence of a problem of civilization, although to different degrees" (56). But having thus mentioned this problem of civilization, Strauss does not immediately spell it out. He even conspicuously fails to do so, declaring instead that it would be "painful and in no way helpful" to "follow Havelock's analysis of the conversation between Socrates and Protagoras." As Socrates backs off in the end from further questioning of Protagoras, it seems, so does Strauss back off from Havelock's look at the *Protagoras*, allowing "two examples" to suffice to show Havelock's failure to listen "patiently to what Socrates actually says in the context" (57). The examples will, Strauss promises, "shed some light on present-day liberalism." Will they do so by also showing us more concerning present-day liberalism's unawareness of the "problem of civilization," which it shares with Protagoras?

The question that Socrates asks Protagoras after his long speech is whether virtue is one or many. The importance of this apparently academic question becomes clear when we consider that Protagoras has claimed that someone can be courageous but unjust, or of bad counsel but just: the suggestion is that wisdom is or can be compatible with injustice, that the wise (*sophos*) are unjust, or that Protagoras teaches injustice. Moreover, Protagoras had

emphasized as “political virtue” justice, moderation and piety (the “gift of Zeus”) in his long speech, but in the exchange with Socrates he adds and emphasizes instead wisdom and courage. Strauss suggests that Protagoras may agree with the Platonic distinction between political (or vulgar) virtue and genuine virtue, the latter consisting (in Plato’s case) of wisdom or (in Protagoras’ case) of “the gift of Prometheus.” This is what is being examined.

Yet there proves to be a difference between the two men. When Socrates directly puts to Protagoras the question of whether one who acts unjustly acts soundly or with good counsel, Protagoras at first claims, coyly, that he would be ashamed to say so (333b–c), and then admits that one might say so, but finally, when pressed by Socrates, instead of answering delivers the relatively long statement (which we referred to earlier) concerning the fact that the good varies from species to species and even within living things from part to part. Socrates requests at this point that Protagoras not give long (and it is implied, evasive) speeches but instead answer his questions directly, with short statements. Havelock, who as Strauss had said earlier makes an infinite amount of Protagoras’ long statement of what Strauss calls an “obvious but not unimportant truth,” takes Protagoras’ statement as representing a “pragmatic epistemology,” “pragmatic classification,” and “sophistic economics.” Havelock is beside himself with anger that Plato should unfairly cut this ‘pragmatic programme’ down with the Socratic demand for short speeches, and is still more angry, it seems, with the followers of Plato who have “obediently followed the lead of this preposterous propaganda” (57–8). Strauss patiently points out that Socrates, for the benefit not only of young Hippocrates but also of Protagoras, is insisting that Protagoras face something he does not wish to face. For while Havelock may think that Protagoras holds justice and utility always to coincide, Socrates sees otherwise: he would have Protagoras own up to the “wicked proposition” to which the “somewhat chastened” Protagoras now privately ascribes and to which Protagoras’ conventionalism moves him—that injustice is sometimes the wise course of action—and take his beneficial “punishment” for doing so, so that he might reject the proposition not only in word but in thought. Yet what is in Socrates’ eyes a painful opportunity for Protagoras to face squarely a problem of civilization—that to follow the justice laid down by the revered ancient lawgiver is not simply profitable—represents to Protagoras a painful “humiliation.” He appears to be directed not so much by a desire for clarity or wisdom as by a certain manliness or love of victory; he remains wrapped up in the notions of worth induced by the “gift of Zeus.” Strauss suggests that had Havelock himself been less of a propagandist for liberalism—the new, fanatical version of the sophists’ moralism—he might have been able to begin understanding the movements that takes place in this

and other Platonic dialogues, rather than approaching the dialogue as propaganda for a "static" doctrine (58).

The second example of Havelock's misreading, with which Strauss concludes his examination of Havelock's interpretation of the *Protagoras*, has to do with the litigation scene (335a–338e—in which Socrates manages to get the assembly of sophists and their followers to agree to compel Protagoras to respond, as he has demanded, with short answers). Hippias, who is perhaps the most boastful fool in all of the Platonic dialogues, appeals to his fellow sophists for a reasonable solution to the present impasse between Protagoras and Socrates concerning the use of short and long speeches, on the ground that "all present" are "by nature, not by law" kindred and fellow citizens, for they all know the nature of things. His proposal that an arbiter therefore be chosen is defeated by Socrates. Havelock sees in this defeat a "not quite forgivable" treatment of Hippias' doctrine of "man's common nature and brotherhood and world citizenship." That is, he takes Hippias' statement the way it is now commonly taken by liberals who are looking for liberals among the ancients, rather than realizing what according to Strauss Hippias is actually teaching: "by nature all wise men are kinsmen and fellow citizens, whereas all other kinship and fellow citizenship rests on law or convention." This is a teaching of another sophist, Strauss concludes, that Plato "does not ridicule;" he ridicules only Hippias' "childish belief that all present know the nature of the things" (59). The incoherent and hidden moralism of the sophist Protagoras becomes in the modern liberal, reared in the doctrine of universal rights, a proud and open but no less incoherent moralism.

4 The Account of the Fragments of Antiphon

But the teaching about the brotherhood of man that Havelock mistakenly gleans from Hippias' words he finds also in the fragments of Antiphon, and in the short final section of his essay Strauss addresses this part of Havelock's work, which he sees as the book's culmination. Antiphon speaks of all men being alike in all respects, on the ground that what is necessary to them by nature (such as nose and mouth) is the same for all; the failure to recognize this he calls "barbaric." Havelock takes this questioning of the usual distinction between Greek and barbarian to be something "opposed to the view of the classics;" his view is based on a misreading of the first book of Aristotle's *Politics* and a disregard of the statements about the superiority of the African city of Carthage found in the *Politics*' second book. A similar false opposition is present in Havelock's discussion of Antiphon's counsel to observe the laws of

the city when with others and the laws of nature when alone. Havelock is certain that despite this counsel Antiphon is “not an immoralist;” Strauss finds no evidence for this view (and, we may add, the only consistent rule of Antiphon stated prior to this is the rule to avoid damage to oneself). Havelock does not deny that Antiphon is advocating “a flexible behavior pattern that involves a double standard,” or is sympathetic to hypocrisy or paying “lip service” to the laws of the city, evading them when they cannot be fought. He is happy to admit it, since, he claims, “idealists” like Plato “would object” to such flexibility or double standards, “[a]s if,” replies Strauss, “Plato had never recommended the noble lie,” or indeed as if Socrates had not ended the discussion with Protagoras with two obvious lies. A third false opposition appears in Havelock’s claim that Antiphon, but not Plato, presents an antithesis between law and nature, which Strauss reminds the reader is present, “although differently understood,” in Plato’s own questioning of law, especially in the *Statesman* (60–1). His discussion of that antithesis will take up the remainder of his argument concerning Antiphon. If the sophist Protagoras had, unlike Socrates, failed to grasp sufficiently the antithesis between law and nature and so failed in truth to take his bearings by the latter, the same is not true of Antiphon, and yet there remains a difference between Antiphon and Socrates concerning this antithesis.

Yet having detailed these false oppositions, and thereby suggested how close the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle were to some crucial sayings found in the fragments of Antiphon’s work, Strauss digresses for a paragraph, one that starts with a praise of Havelock for a discovery which, Strauss playfully suggests, redeems all of Havelock’s “lapses.” Havelock notices Antiphon’s explicit statement that the law determines for the ears what they are to hear, for the eyes what they are to see, and for the tongue what it ought to say. And so it dawns on Havelock that the ancient city “had its totalitarian aspects,” or as Strauss puts it, “was not liberal or limited by a First Amendment.” Noting that the frankness of Antiphon’s statement is at odds with both its content and with the previously quoted sayings concerning the need for dissimulation and caution, Strauss suggests that the shocking statement against law made as it were “in the presence of witnesses” (because written down) likely appeared in its original context “hidden away in the middle of an innocent exposition or not presented by the author in his own name but entrusted to other people.” He wishes that Havelock had reflected on this possibility both in Antiphon’s fragments and in other writers, who could easily have had the same insight and need for caution. As we have seen, he means of course Plato and Aristotle above all, but he also seems to be including himself in this.

Returning, then, to Havelock’s discussion of Antiphon’s antithesis of law and nature (61b), Strauss finds Havelock to “unintentionally reveal” the

"fundamental difference between the modern liberal and the so-called Greek liberal." Havelock notes that according to Antiphon, not the virtue of an inspired lawgiver but a social compact of society's members is what frames the law. Havelock bases this conjecture on Antiphon's claim that the laws stem from agreement (and not from nature), a statement which, Strauss points out, is not at all incompatible with the possibility that the laws "are the work of an outstanding man regarded as endowed with superhuman virtue whose proposals were accepted by human beings." Nonetheless Havelock's blunder this time drives him to ask a revealing question: "If law is a compact reached historically by human beings, why is it not natural and organic as are other items in man's progress?" In Havelock's puzzlement, Strauss indicates, is disclosed the fundamental difference between the so-called Greek liberal and the modern liberal: for the latter, "'natural' is not a term of distinction." The cause of this difference appears in the word "historically." As Strauss argues in the first chapter of *Natural Right and History*, from the time of Hegel and in the wake of the German historical school that was strengthened in reaction against his thought, the understanding of nature and all that it entailed for philosophy came to be lost, through the adoption of the notion of an organic historical process or processes. As Strauss puts it at the end of this paragraph, "[t]he term 'historical' . . . which is almost the modern equivalent for conventional, serves no other function than to obscure a very obscure event in the development of modern thought." That event is connected to the failure of modernity to satisfy, as it had expected it could, all of humanity through a progressive movement toward a rational, atheistic society.

In Strauss' final elaboration of the ancient antithesis between what is by law or convention and what is by nature we receive not only a better sense of the fundamental difference between ancient and modern liberals, but also the answer to our question of what Strauss means by the "problem of civilization" recognized by ancient philosophers, which now comes to sight as a problem with the laws that make civilization possible. To the modern liberal's Greek predecessors, "not everything that is, is 'natural.'"

Zeus "is," for otherwise one could not speak about him, distinguish him from Kronos, Hera, and so on; but in what sense "is" he? He is by virtue of opinion or establishment or agreement or law (cf. *Laws* 904a 9–b1 with Antiphon B 44A 2 lines 27–28), whereas man, for instance, is not by virtue of law or opinion, but by nature or in truth. If the liberal rejoins, "But at any rate the law or opinion by virtue of which Zeus is, is not merely by law or opinion but is necessary for the people who adopted it or cling to it," his Greek predecessors would ask him how he knows this: is there

no arbitrariness and hence in particular no arbitrary freezing, wise or unwise, of errors salutary or otherwise? (62)

The ancients found law more problematic than do the modern liberals because they saw that laws are not necessarily or even likely a reflection of the *genuine* needs of humanity, but instead are determined by “their *opinions* about their needs, or by the opinion of the ruling groups about their needs, and hence above all by their opinions about God, world and man.”²³ Putting this into the language of Husserlian phenomenology, as he had in the second and third chapters of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss here declares: “In other words, man fashions a ‘state within a state’: the man-made ‘worlds’ have a fundamentally different status from ‘the world’ and its parts.” As we have seen, awareness of this difference is common to both pre-Platonic and Platonic philosophy. But the great advantage Platonic philosophy enjoys over the former is its recognition of the need to establish that the pre-philosophic or pre-scientific “world,” the human “world” given its shape above all by divine law, is one that, given the unknowability of first things, cannot be lightly dismissed but must instead be shown to find its true fulfillment in the philosophic life.

With a view to the existentialist alternative, we recall that the doctrine of historical development, through which the crucial antithesis of nature and law or convention came to be lost, is not a doctrine limited to the modern liberal or to progressivist philosophy, but was (uncritically) also taken up by Heidegger. It is true that Heidegger’s existentialism recognizes the difficulty entailed in the claim that law reflects the true needs of humanity or of a people, and so frankly abandons any claim to the rationality or naturalness of our moral direction by presenting it as the result of our “decision.” But it none the less presents one’s historical situation or fate or particular political, legal, or historical situation—or what to the ancients, including the pre-Socratics, is convention—as that which must be freely embraced by anyone who would live a “resolute,” actively engaged existence.²⁴ “Being present now on behalf of ‘one’s time,’” or the “resolution into the world-historical situation” is required.²⁵

23 Leo Strauss, “Natural Right,” lecture delivered on January 9, 1946 in the General Seminar at the New School for Social Research and in February 1946 in Annapolis, MD. Typed manuscript, 20 pages, with notes written in pencil. (Leo Strauss Papers, Box 6, Folder 15), at p. 7. Patard (2014) 390.

24 Heidegger (1927), 299. As Strauss puts it in “The Intellectual Situation of the Present,” “[t]he free decision of the person ‘does not come about in an empty space.’ It is conditioned by the history in which the person concerned stands.” Strauss (1932) 243.

25 Heidegger (1927) 385; cf. 383f. 299f., 391.

By contrast, the ancients sought what is by nature over and against an embrace of such convention, and as we have seen, the more thoughtful among them were, unlike Protagoras, prepared to accept the moral ramifications of their findings.

In his final elaboration on Havelock's understanding of the meaning of the antithesis between nature and law Strauss reminds us of another key aspect of the pre-Socratics that they shared with Plato and that has a direct bearing on the question of what it means to direct one's life by nature and not law. He notes Havelock's "belief" that Antiphon "had 'a deep feeling for the inviolability of the human organism,'" and that Havelock supports this belief by misquoting a saying of Antiphon: "To be alive is a natural condition." What Antiphon actually says, Strauss points out, is "To live and to die is from nature." As Strauss amusingly puts it, the human organism is "most violable," that is, violable by nature, which Havelock has come, through the conflation of nature and law or convention, to endow with a sacred status in Antiphon's eyes; he even declares Antiphon to have a "reverence for life" instead of realizing that for Antiphon the good is whatever is conducive to life and therefore "the good by nature is ultimately the pleasant," as indeed Socrates proved it to be also for Protagoras (though, in Protagoras' case, the pleasant nobly understood). Law claims to protect innocent lives from violation, especially by other humans, but Antiphon doubts this claim, just as he doubts the natural character of the sacred institution of marriage, that is, its beneficial character. We see, then, why Strauss has called Havelock's account of Antiphon's political doctrine the "culmination" of Havelock's thesis: the modern liberal's political doctrine, having commenced with a doctrine of "natural right" that is absent from the ancient conventionalists, culminates, through the adoption of "History" as a meaningful dimension of human life, in the re-sacralization of that which to the ancients was by law or convention. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of Heideggerian existentialism.

As we have seen, Strauss' procedure allows him to state as if incidentally what Socratics had in common with the pre-Socratics. This proves to be a great deal: It includes the recognition of the need for esotericism; the recognition of the need to show that first things (whatever they might be) are not gods; recognition of the antithesis of nature and *nomos*; recognition of the deceptive character of the "world" of *nomos*; and recognition of the crucial philosophic need to accept one's mortality and that of all human accomplishment. The modern liberal, by contrast, has lost sight of all of these things. He is closest in thinking indeed to the sophist, with whom he proves to share an incoherent moralism, but lacks even the sophist's liberation from the rage of the many that moves ever in the direction of barbarism. The modern liberal manifests thereby

evidence not of the progress that is ever on his lips, but of a regress. With his essay on Havelock Strauss points the way to a recovery of the insights that had been threatened to be permanently obscured by the victory of modern liberalism.

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On “Classic Natural Right” in *Natural Right and History*

Devin Stauffer

Although it is only one chapter in a long and wide-ranging work, Chapter Four of *Natural Right and History* is one of Leo Strauss’ most illuminating statements on classical political philosophy, especially in its Socratic form.¹ The chapter, titled “Classic Natural Right,” has three main sections of widely varying length, each of them important both in its own right and in connection with the others. The first and by far the briefest of the three sections is a remarkable statement—the most direct Strauss ever offered—on the Socratic Turn, that is, on Socrates’ turn from his youthful study of natural science to a new philosophic approach that entailed, among other things, a greater emphasis on moral and political questions. The second section presents a memorable—in its own way “classic”—sketch of the most prominent classic natural right teaching as it differed from the classical conventionalist position that denied the existence of natural right. Finally, the third section is a dense and multi-layered consideration of various types of classic natural right teachings, but with special attention given to the teaching that emerged from Socrates’ dialectical approach to the problem of justice. In this essay, I will consider each of these three sections, with an eye also on the connections between them. Doing so will require that I highlight only some of the many twists and turns in Strauss’ difficult text.

Before I turn to my main task some words are in order about the book of which “Classic Natural Right” is a part and especially about the immediately preceding chapter, “The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right,” with which Chapter Four is closely connected. Now, the central question of *Natural Right and History*, despite what the title suggests, is not the question of natural right so much as it is the question of the possibility of philosophy. These are not two versions of the same question, however much Strauss may sometimes blur the distinction between them. The blurring of the distinction is a result, not only of intentional obfuscation on Strauss’ part, but also of the fact that historicism,

1 This essay was written while I held a Carl Friedrich von Siemens Fellowship in Munich. I would like to thank Heinrich Meier, the Director of the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation, for making this possible.

Strauss' chief opponent in *Natural Right and History*, denies both the possibility of philosophy and the existence of natural right. In fact, the latter denial is a consequence of the former, according to Strauss. "The historicist contention," he says, "can be reduced to the assertion that natural right is impossible because philosophy in the full sense of the word is impossible" (35).² Still, even if the two questions are linked, they should not be collapsed into one, as Strauss makes clear in the same paragraph by indicating that a vindication of the possibility of philosophy would not yet be a vindication of natural right: "the possibility of philosophy is only the necessary and not the sufficient condition of natural right" (35). If that formulation makes the distinction between the two questions as clear as one could wish, it is not Strauss' last word on the matter. For there prove to be other important connections between the two questions, besides the one that historicism creates or indicates by denying the existence of natural right on the basis of a denial of the possibility of philosophy. More important even than that connection is that non-historicist philosophy itself—first at the peak of its ancient development, and then again in a different way in its modern resurgence—tried to vindicate the possibility of philosophy through steps that involved developing what may be called (in each case) a "natural right teaching." Strauss points early in *Natural Right and History* to the modern efforts in this direction by remarking that the crisis of modern natural right could lead—as it did—to a crisis in philosophy as such and thus to historicism "only because in the modern centuries philosophy as such had become thoroughly politicized" (34).³ Although he suggests that this modern development marked a departure from the original meaning of philosophy as "the humanizing quest for the eternal order" (34), Strauss will go on later in the book to indicate that classical philosophy, too, albeit in a very different way, was led in its own efforts to defend the possibility of philosophy to become, not indeed "thoroughly politicized," but deeply concerned with politics and with the question of natural right in particular. For these reasons as well, then, the two main questions of *Natural Right and History* prove to be connected. In fact, Strauss' very blurring of the distinction between them can even be understood as a way of pointing to some of the partially hidden thoughts at the heart of the book.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. The simplest indication that there is a difference between the two questions at issue is conveyed in Chapter Three, "The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right." For there Strauss shows that classical

2 All unspecified references in the text are to *Natural Right and History*.

3 On this remark and its significance to the structure and argument of *Natural Right and History*, see Bruell (2011) 89, and the broader context of 88–91.

philosophy originally tended towards conventionalism without for that reason denying the possibility of philosophy. In other words, the dominant position among the pre-Socratic philosophers—conventionalism—rested on the idea of nature and asserted the possibility of philosophy, while nevertheless holding that right or justice is a matter of mere human fiat. Such a position, then, is at least possible, whether or not it is ultimately sound or tenable. Indeed, Strauss goes so far as to suggest that it was, if not quite inevitable, then at least predictable and understandable that philosophy, which itself emerges with the distinction between nature and convention, would initially arrive at the conventionalist conclusion about right: “Right presents itself, to begin with, as identical with law or custom or as a character of it; and custom or convention comes to sight, with the emergence of philosophy, as that which hides nature” (93). Thus, even if many of the pre-Socratic philosophers were not particularly concerned with politics, pre-Socratic philosophy from the beginning had political implications or an implicit political teaching. The character of that teaching can be seen in a saying of Heraclitus that Strauss calls “the crucial pre-Socratic text”: “In God’s view, all things are fair [noble] and good and just, but men have made the supposition that some things are just and others are unjust” (93, as quoted and translated by Strauss).

If Heraclitus’ saying conveys the central conclusion many of the pre-Socratic philosophers drew about right, some of them developed much more than an implicit political teaching. Strauss spends a considerable portion of Chapter Three—more than half of the chapter—laying out the conventionalist critique of natural right. It is not possible or necessary to go into detail here regarding the many arguments that make up that critique. But let me summarize some of the most important points that culminate in what Strauss calls “the nerve of the conventionalist argument” (107). The first point has already been indicated by the quotation from Heraclitus: the pre-Socratic conventionalists denied that God, “or,” as Strauss puts it, “whatever one may call the first cause,” is concerned about justice (93–4). With his reformulation “or whatever one may call the first cause,” Strauss indicates that if the early philosophers believed in any gods at all—which one could well doubt—the gods they believed in were limited by a more fundamental necessity and hence not the kind of gods who miraculously intervene to help the just or punish the wicked (compare 89–90). According to the view in question, then, “justice has no superhuman support” (94). But the denial of the existence of providential gods is not enough, by itself, to lead one to deny natural right. “For,” as Strauss explains, “however indifferent to moral distinctions the cosmic order may be thought to be, human nature, as distinguished from nature in general, may well be the basis of such distinctions” (94).

Now, the conventionalists, for their part, were more than ready to grant that one should look to human nature, especially to natural human desires and inclinations, for the standard of how one should live; they were more than ready to accept the notion of a best human life that is best because it is most in accordance with nature (94–5). But they denied that this best and most natural human life is the life devoted to justice (95). For they denied that dedication to the requirements of justice—at least the full, unwavering, sincere dedication that the city asks of the truly just—is always good for the individual. The question of natural right, then, can almost be reduced to the question of the goodness of justice or right for the individual, who, according to the conventionalists, is a natural whole or unit in a way that the city is not. But why did they regard the city as an unnatural whole? And why did they regard it as bad for the individual, at least at times, to abide by the city's dictates?

Their most important line of argument begins from their critique of the law. The law, the conventionalists argue, is self-contradictory: although it claims to be good and noble, it is the product of the opinions or decisions of the multitude of citizens, which clearly are not always good and noble (101). But that does not fully settle the matter, because the further question is "whether the claim of the law to be something good or noble can be simply dismissed as altogether unfounded or whether it contains an element of truth" (101). The element of truth in the law's claim to be good or noble is that the law points to a trans-legal standard of justice by claiming to serve the common good. The common good, it would seem, provides a natural foundation for justice, not only because "the common good is exactly what we mean by 'the just,'" but also because the common good is clearly determined, not by mere convention, but by what is truly good for the city: "the conventions of a city cannot make good for the city what is, in fact, fatal for it and vice versa" (102). But the conventionalists deny that there is a common good. Cities, they argue, are not genuine wholes united by a single interest or good, but rather collections of rival factions, one of which prevails and then rules solely with a view to its own interest (102–3). Even in those cases in which a mixed regime or a noble ruling class might seem to overcome this problem, the continued dependence of the city on violence shows that the solution is never complete (103). Then there is the further question of the relation of each city to the other cities: each city is always populated by a mere part of the human race, which has been arbitrarily set apart from the rest of humanity, and thus each city exists in a tension with the other cities that often compels it to use force and fraud. Now, it is true that not all cities treat their neighbors harshly. But the unfortunate fact is that those cities that refrain from harming other cities often pay a very

steep price for their restraint (106). And this problem leads, finally, to the last step in the argument, since, as for cities, so for individuals. That is, it is possible for individuals to live justly—to obey the law, to refrain from ever harming others, to devote themselves to the “common good”—but in doing so they would not do what is best for themselves, the conventionalists argue, because the city makes demands on its citizens that are in conflict with what is good for them as individuals (106–7). To support these demands, the city must claim that it is of higher dignity than the individuals who make it up, or that its dictates are sacred. “But this claim, which is of the essence of the city and of right, is essentially fictitious” (107).

In laying out the conventionalists’ arguments, Strauss does not pull his—or their—punches. After reading his presentation of their critique of natural right, it is difficult to deny that it is a powerful critique—much more powerful, for instance, than the common argument from the sheer variety of notions of justice. Still, that is not to deny that Strauss’ ultimate intention in his account of classical conventionalism is to indicate its flaws or shortcomings. After all, Chapter Four begins with an important statement on the Socratic Turn, and the necessity of that turn depends on the inadequacy of the approach taken by Socrates’ predecessors. It is true that Strauss is not very forthcoming in Chapter Three itself about any problems he sees in the conventionalists’ position. But he does indicate that the conventionalists’ arguments, as powerful as they may be, were put forward without sufficient consideration of the claims on the other side. Especially when one looks back on Chapter Three from Chapter Four, one can see the weaknesses of their approach, which come to light by the contrast with the approach of the Socratics, who took the claims of the city and of right far more seriously. And even in Chapter Three, Strauss plants some seeds of doubt as to the adequacy of the conventionalists’ position. For instance, his presentation of their position leads one to wonder whether they had solid grounds for their key assumption that “by nature everyone seeks his own good and nothing but his own good” (106; consider also 95, 107–9, 115). Perhaps even more important, he prompts one to ask whether the pre-Socratic philosophers, as well as the sophists who followed in their wake, could vindicate their view that there is no divine support for justice (see again 93–4 together with 89–90; see also 96–7). On this last point, Strauss indicates that the deepest root of conventionalism is materialism (109), and presumably it was on the ground of their materialism that the most important conventionalists based their denial of divine providence (see also 113, 117). But did they have an adequate defense of their materialism, that is, an adequate argument as to why it was more than a plausible assumption on their part? If they did, Strauss nowhere presents it, and later remarks he will make about materialism make

one doubt that he regarded such an argument as possible (see 172, 176, 201, 272–4, 311–2).⁴

The question of whether the pre-Socratic conventionalists had an adequate theoretical basis for their position is relevant, of course, to another issue at the core of *Natural Right and History*: the quarrel between reason and revelation. Although the questions of the existence of natural right and the possibility of philosophy come on stage earlier in the book, the quarrel between reason and revelation quietly but unmistakably comes to assume its crucial position alongside them (see especially 74–5). It proves, moreover, to be deeply connected to the more fundamental of the two earlier questions, the question of the possibility of philosophy (consider 75, 81–2, 89). But if the pre-Socratics did not have an adequate approach to these interconnected issues, that means they remain very much live issues as Strauss moves from Chapter Three to Chapter Four, just as they remained very much live issues as Socrates moved away from the approach of his predecessors and set out on a new path.

1

As I indicated earlier, Chapter Four begins with a statement on the Socratic Turn. The transition from the preceding account of conventionalism is abrupt. It is also unclear how it should be understood. Is Strauss moving now from the conventionalist critique of natural right to the Socratic and post-Socratic defense of it? It certainly seems so. But he is also moving, at the same time, from pre-Socratic philosophy as such to Socratic philosophy as such. And we know by now not to equate the question of natural right with the question of the possibility of philosophy. Could it be that Socrates' deepest difference from his predecessors was not so much over the question of natural right as over the question of how to establish the possibility of philosophy?

Strauss' initial description of the significance of the Socratic Turn might seem to belie that suggestion. For Strauss begins from the view that Socrates founded political philosophy, and thus originated "the whole tradition of natural right teachings," by turning away from the study of nature as a whole and limiting himself to moral and political questions—that is, to "the human things" (120). Yet, although Strauss begins from this view, he is careful to distance himself

4 Cf. Strauss (1952) 142–3. I am indebted for this last point about materialism to an unpublished and untitled lecture on Chapters Three and Four of *Natural Right and History* by David Bolotin (2001, 7). More generally, Bolotin's lecture has been very helpful to me in my efforts to understand both chapters.

from it: this is the view at which one arrives if one puts together what “is said” by the tradition (or by certain sources in the tradition) and what one is likely to glean “from a cursory reading of the pertinent texts which at first glance seem to supply the most authentic information” (120). That is hardly a ringing endorsement, especially coming from Strauss. And indeed Strauss indicates that the view in question is deficient in several ways. First, as Chapter Three has already shown us, it is not entirely true that Socrates was the first philosopher to pay serious attention to moral and political matters: at least some of the pre-Socratics did too, even if they drew conclusions different from those of Socrates and his heirs. Second, Socrates’ post-turn philosophizing was more continuous than it first appears with the thought of his predecessors, even in its substance. Socrates preserved key elements of their outlook, such as the distinction between nature and convention, which “retains its full significance” (121). Most important, however, is the fact that Socrates *did not* turn away from the study of nature as a whole. Even if he placed greater weight than any previous philosopher on the human things, not only was he compelled by his concern for the human things to ask also about “the divine or natural things,” but the divine or natural things were always of concern to him in their own right. “Like every other philosopher, [Socrates] identified wisdom, or the goal of philosophy, with the science of all the beings: he never ceased considering ‘what each of the beings is’” (122).

None of this is to deny that Socrates took a new approach. But it was a new approach, in the first place, to the study of all things. Only subsequently, or as a consequence of the new approach to the study of all things, was Socrates led to give especially close attention to the human things (122). Before we try to understand its connection with his increased concern with the human things, we should first consider Socrates’ new approach to the study of all things. In what did its newness consist? According to Strauss’ brief but instructive account of it, its newness consisted in the abandonment of the attempt—to which Socrates’ predecessors had devoted themselves—to discover the roots of the whole and the processes of becoming that lead from those roots to the world as it is given to us (122–3). Rather than searching for the roots, understood as the first things or the truest beings out of which the more ephemeral beings that we see around us emerge and into which they perish (compare 122–3 with 89–90), Socrates turned his attention to the world as it presents itself to us. He approached the given beings, not as epiphenomena of a deeper reality, but as the most important parts of the whole in its immediately intelligible articulation. “The whole,” as Strauss puts it, “has a natural articulation” (123; cf. 77–9). That articulation, “the manifest articulation of the completed whole,” is above all an articulation into classes or kinds of things. Thus Socrates

directed his attention to the class character of the beings in the completed forms in which we encounter them in ordinary life (123).

Now, it is about this approach that Strauss makes the crucial remark that it "was indeed of such a character that it permitted, and favored, the study of the human things as such, i.e., of the human things in so far as they are not reducible to the divine or natural things" (122). And to underscore the importance of that remark, he repeats a version of it at the end of the same key paragraph (123). But what does Strauss mean when he says that the new approach "permitted, and favored," the study of the human things as such? It is easier to see what he means by saying that it *permitted* such a study. By turning away from the materialistic reductionism of the earlier natural scientists, according to which all things are the products of fundamentally similar processes of becoming, Socrates' new approach allowed each class of the beings to be understood on its own terms. The human things, then, could at last speak for themselves, as in a way they always had in ordinary life, but not under the lens of scientific investigation (cf. 128–9t).

But what Strauss means by saying that the new approach *favored* the study of the human things is more mysterious. He does not offer an explanation. However, two possibilities—which are not mutually exclusive—suggest themselves. First, Strauss emphasizes that Socrates turned his attention to the given world, which means to the world as it presents itself to man: the "articulation" of the whole to which Strauss refers is an articulation to man and, it would seem, dependent on man. But if philosophy turns its attention in this direction, it would seem incumbent upon it to clarify the human things, not only because they are an important part of the world of man, but also because confusions about the human things can distort one's perspective on the whole or keep one from grasping the whole in its truly natural articulation (consider 124–5). Second, there is the further possibility that may be pointed to by Strauss' repeated use of the phrase he uses here to refer to the non-human things: "the divine or natural things." Strauss uses that formulation four times in the span of less than a page (122). Might he mean to indicate by it that Socrates had come to think that the study of the human things somehow holds the key to answering the deepest question about the fundamental character of all things—the question embedded in the formulation "the divine *or* natural things"? After all, if Socrates did think that he could answer that question—the very question the dogmatically atheistic conventionalists had been unable to answer—it was not through his new approach to the study of nature as a whole. For that approach renounces the effort to discover the first things or the underlying causes of all the beings, and thus the question of whether the ultimate causes are divine or natural is left open by Socrates' new approach

to the study of nature as a whole. Strauss' formulation ("the divine or natural things") is surely meant to point to the openness of that question for Socrates. But could Socrates, who "identified wisdom, or the goal of philosophy, with the science of all the beings," have remained satisfied with simply leaving such a fundamental question open? And if not, could it have been through his study of the human things that he attempted to answer it?⁵

It is best to leave this as a question, since Strauss' presentation does not allow us to do more here than to speculate. Nor are we in a position to take up the further question that is obviously raised by the second possibility: *How* could a study of the human things help to answer the deepest question concerning all things? On this question, all that is possible here is merely to take note of what Strauss goes on to stress about Socrates' method. He points out that Socrates, in beginning his search for the class character of the beings from what is "first for us," was led to focus less on what we *see* of the beings than on what is *said* about them (123–4). Socrates began from the opinions men express about the natures of the various beings. But he did not simply affirm or accept such opinions—in fact, he could hardly have taken that step, or at any rate long persisted in it, since the common opinions about "some very important groups of things" contradict one another (124). Common opinions, then, provided Socrates with the *starting-points* of a dialectical method whose underlying premise and ultimate character Strauss spells out as follows:

Socrates implied that disregarding the opinions about the natures of things would amount to abandoning the most important access to reality which we have, or the most important vestiges of the truth which are within our reach. He implied that "the universal doubt" of all opinions would lead us, not into the heart of the truth, but into a void. Philosophy consists, therefore, in the ascent from opinions to knowledge or to the truth, in an ascent that may be said to be guided by opinions. It is this ascent which Socrates had primarily in mind when he called philosophy "dialectics." (124)

5 Compare Bolotin (2001) 8. Bolotin points to these corroborating passages: Strauss (1958) 19; Strauss (1978) 20. Regarding the phrase "the divine or natural things," see the quotation marks that Strauss puts around "the natural world" in the context of referring to "the most elementary premises of the Bible" (80). See also 81: "The Old Testament, whose basic premise may be said to be the implicit rejection of philosophy, does not know 'nature': the Hebrew term for 'nature' is unknown to the Hebrew Bible."

Socrates' dialectical approach set him apart from his predecessors. But Strauss goes out of his way here to indicate that it also marks an important difference between Socrates' thought and that of some of the leading early modern philosophers, such as Descartes, who would later attempt to put philosophy on a new and very different footing.

2

After sketching Socrates' dialectical approach, Strauss pivots away from it. But he does so in a way that indicates that he will return to Socratic dialectics. The path leading away from—but ultimately back to—Socratic dialectics begins with a return to conventionalism. Since the transition here is rather complicated, let me quote the transitional paragraph in full:

Conventionalism disregards the understanding embodied in opinion and appeals from opinion to nature. For this reason, to say nothing of others, Socrates and his successors were forced to prove the existence of natural right on the ground chosen by conventionalism. They had to prove it by appeal to the "facts" as distinguished from the "speeches." As will appear presently, this seemingly more direct appeal to being merely confirms the fundamental Socratic thesis (126).

Brief as it is, this paragraph is dense and complicated; it contains several puzzles. What were the other reasons ("to say nothing of others") that moved Socrates and his successors to argue on the ground chosen by conventionalism? And why—even by the explicit reason given—did Socrates and his successors think that they had to follow an approach that they regarded as a mistake? The answer to this second question, which perhaps goes some way to answering the first as well, may be that Socratic political philosophy did not emerge in a vacuum: it emerged in the wake of the prior conventionalist teaching which had given the impression to many that the teaching of philosophy as such was conventionalist. The concern to counter that impression, by doing battle with conventionalism, may have been one of the reasons the Socratics were willing to argue on the ground chosen by conventionalism—that is, "by appeal to the 'facts' as distinguished from the 'speeches.'" But there is a further difficulty here. For if "this seemingly more direct appeal to being merely confirms the fundamental Socratic thesis"—the thesis, that is, that opinions provide us with "the most important access to reality which we have"—does Strauss not warn us here not to expect too much from the coming section? Or, perhaps better,

does he not alert us to be ready to see, not just the strengths of the approach he will outline here, but also its limits, which limits reaffirm the need for a more genuinely dialectical approach?

The greatest strength of the approach Strauss proceeds to sketch is that it combats conventionalism directly, responding to the conventionalists' arguments with a set of observations that reveal the narrowness of their view of human nature and point toward a more capacious view. Thus, against the conventionalists' identification of the good with the pleasant, the Socratic defenders of natural right point to the fact that "the wants" precede the pleasures, and they observe that the wants themselves are structured by the hierarchic order of man's natural constitution (126–7). Against the conventionalists' claim that each man is concerned solely with his own good, the Socratics point to man's natural sociality and to the concomitant sense all men have that we are not simply free to live as we please (129–30). Against the conventionalists' argument that the political community is unnatural because it arbitrarily sets one segment of humanity apart from the rest and depends on coercion to enforce its dictates, the Socratics reply that human beings are such that we need limited communities and even some measure of coercion to reach our full potential (129–33). If the city—even or especially the small, closed, rigorous city—is necessary for the full flourishing of our humanity, then the restrictions that the city imposes on its citizens and the devotion it asks of them cannot rightly be dismissed as mere conventional impositions on human nature. Some impositions, while unnatural in one sense, may be natural in a deeper sense, if they are necessary for the emergence of a kind of excellence and happiness that can flourish only in an atmosphere of restrictions and high demands. The city is redeemed as the source and stage of true virtue if it is indeed the case that "politics is the field on which human excellence can show itself in its full growth" (133; consider also 128–9, 134).

Now, of the counterarguments to conventionalism just sketched (much more briefly than Strauss himself sketches them), the one that jumps out as the most promising basis for a full-fledged vindication of natural right is the argument regarding man's natural sociality. Although Strauss says that "[i]t is the hierarchic order of man's natural constitution which supplies the basis for natural right as the classics understood it" (127), two pages later he says that "[i]t is man's natural sociality that is the basis of natural right *in the narrow or strict sense of right*" (129, emphasis added). And Strauss reserves some of his most beautiful lines in all of *Natural Right and History* for the paragraph on natural sociality. For instance, after remarking on the "absurd taboos" that one finds even among primitive tribes, he offers the unforgettable response: "But what prompts the savages in their savage doings is not savagery but the divination of

right" (130). Nevertheless, it seems that the argument regarding natural sociability, as powerful as it is, cannot be the last word. For, as much as we may be social beings aware that we are not simply free to live as we please, or to seek our own good at the expense of others, the importance of the individual good cannot ultimately be denied (see 94–5). After all, the claim of the city itself, so to speak, is not just that it brings men together as naturally social beings, but also that it perfects its citizens and thereby makes genuine happiness possible for them (see 133–4). But is this claim true in the case of all cities? Is it fully true in the case of any city? The classical defenders of natural right were led by questions like these to develop their teaching on the best regime. And Strauss turns for the rest of this section to a long discussion of that teaching.

Strauss's discussion of the classical doctrine of the best regime is long because the doctrine itself is complicated. I cannot do more here than highlight a few key points. Strauss gives this initial formulation of how the classical thinkers understood the best regime: "The best regime is that for which one would wish or pray. Closer examination would show that the best regime is the object of the wish or prayer of all good men or of all gentlemen as that object is interpreted by the philosopher" (138–9). Now, Strauss goes on to indicate, shortly after this statement, that the best regime is meant to be possible without miraculous changes in human nature, and yet its actualization is "extremely improbable" (139). This difficulty is connected to another that emerges in the following way. The best regime in the classical view is an aristocracy in which "the best men habitually rule" (140). Does that mean the rule of the wise? Yes, it would seem so: the classical philosophers regarded wisdom as the highest title to rule, and they regarded the wise as the best men. Yet the rule of the wise is unlikely to be achieved in its purity—it is "as a rule, impracticable"—and far more likely is the theft of its name by its evil twin: tyranny masquerading as the rule of the wise (141). Thus, "the natural right of the wise must be questioned, and the indispensable requirement for wisdom must be qualified by the requirement for consent" (141). A recognition of the need to qualify the rule of wisdom in deference to the demands of consent led the classical thinkers to emphasize the importance of the rule of law and to try to forge an alliance with the best of the politically influential classes, "the gentlemen." It turns out, then, that the gentlemen, at least as much as the philosophers, are essential to the classical political scheme. Strauss concludes this line of reflection with this helpful statement: "To summarize, one may say that it is characteristic of the classic natural right doctrine to culminate in a twofold answer to the question of the best regime: the simply best regime would be the absolute rule of the wise; the practically best regime is the rule, under law, of gentlemen, or the mixed regime" (142–3).

Now, having reached this point, Strauss stresses the political character of the classical teaching on the best regime. What he has in mind by that comes out, above all, by way of contrast with a notion that emerged “on the basis of the biblical faith”: the classical best regime is not the Heavenly City of God, and thus the classical best regime doctrine does not call, as later Christian doctrines did, for a turn away from political life in the direction of devotion to an order governed by God as the supreme lawgiver (144). As Strauss puts it with graceful understatement: “The notion of God as lawgiver takes on a certainty and definiteness [with the Bible] which it never possessed in classical philosophy” (144). The Christian appropriation of the classical natural right doctrine, which had such a powerful influence on how that doctrine was received in later ages, entailed a profound modification, that is to say, a profound distortion, of the genuine classical teaching (144–5). But Strauss acknowledges that this modification of the classical teaching “was in a way anticipated by the classics.” It was anticipated in this way: “According to the classics, political life as such is essentially inferior in dignity to the philosophic life” (145).

This last statement, which points to perhaps the deepest problem in the classical doctrine of the best regime understood as a political teaching that fully vindicates natural right, allows Strauss to bring the discussion in this section full circle. For having warned us at the outset to moderate our expectations from the section, he concludes it with this crucial remark: “If man’s ultimate end is trans-political, natural right would seem to have a trans-political root. Yet can natural right be adequately understood if it is directly referred to this root? Can natural right be deduced from man’s natural end? Can it be deduced from anything?” (145)

3

The remark just quoted—culminating in these three striking questions—is a major turning point in Strauss’ discussion. It marks, on the one hand, the prophesied failure, or at least the inadequacy, of an approach that would deduce natural right from a set of “facts,” and it prepares, on the other hand, a return to a more dialectical approach that begins from “speeches” or opinions. Thus it is no surprise that in the very next paragraph, which completes the transition from the second section of the chapter to the third, Strauss speaks in terms that remind us of what he said earlier about “the fundamental Socratic thesis.” Since justice and the rest of human virtue are problematic; since they are matters of perpetual dispute; since they exist above all as objects of aspiration rather than fulfillment and thus “in speech rather than in deed”—for all

these reasons, "the proper starting point for studying the perfection of human nature, and hence, in particular, natural right, is what is said about these subjects or the opinions about them" (145–6).

With this reaffirmation of the need for a genuinely dialectical approach, Strauss restarts his discussion of classic natural right. He now divides the classic natural right teachings into three types: the Socratic-Platonic, the Aristotelian, and the Thomistic. (He places the Stoic teaching in the first type.) Although he thus gives the coming discussion a taxonomical structure, it soon becomes clear that Strauss' aims in this new section go far beyond providing an adequate taxonomy of the varieties of classic natural right teachings. Especially in his discussion of the first type of teaching, Strauss seeks, in the first place, to show how the Socratic analysis of our most basic opinions about justice brings out what he calls "the problem of justice." Indeed, one could apply to Strauss himself words that he uses in this context to describe the aims of Plato's Socrates:

Many interpreters of Plato do not sufficiently consider the possibility that his Socrates was as much concerned with understanding what justice is, i.e., with understanding the whole complexity of the problem of justice, as with preaching justice. For if one is concerned with understanding the problem of justice, one must go through the stage in which justice presents itself as identical with citizen-morality, and one must not merely rush through that stage (150n24).

Now, despite Strauss' admonition not to rush, I can only summarize here his account of the Socratic analysis of justice. Strauss begins, as Socrates does, from the conflict between the two most common opinions about justice: the opinion that justice is good and the opinion that justice consists in giving to everyone what is due to him (146). Since what is due to each person is determined, to begin with, by the law, the line of argument Strauss pursues, which uses the first opinion to override or modify the second one, quickly becomes a critique of the law: if justice is to remain good, it is necessary to go beyond the law, which cannot be counted on to distribute things well (146). Rather than defining justice by what is legally owed to each person, it is better to define it as giving to each what is truly good for him. But to give to each what it truly good for him requires wisdom, and "not everyone knows what is good for man in general, and for every individual in particular" (147). Thus we are led to the conclusion that justice requires the rule of wisdom and that a truly just society is "a society in which wise men are in absolute control" (147).

The argument here for the rule of the wise, although it is presented (even by Strauss) very briefly, is not an argument that is imposed on ordinary political

life; rather, it is an argument that emerges from the ordinary view of justice itself, when one takes as seriously as possible the most deeply held opinions at the heart of that view. The movement, to repeat, is from justice understood in terms of the established law to the view that the wise should rule because only they have the knowledge necessary to assign things, including jobs, in a way that ensures the goodness of justice. But this is not yet the end of the argument. "We must go further," Strauss says (148). The reasons it is necessary to go further—or at any rate the two reasons that Strauss gives here—are, first, that even a society ruled by wise men, if it remained a closed society in which membership depended on accidents of birth, could not do full justice to the principle of distribution by merit; and, second, that such a society, which would have to prepare itself for possible wars, would be forced to foster qualities in some of its citizens that it could not help regarding as simply bad (148–9). With respect to the latter problem, Strauss speaks of the "inevitable self-contradiction" within "citizen-morality": the city is compelled by the needs of self-defense to embrace as necessary and to praise as good in war certain qualities and actions, such as successful deception, that it cannot avoid also condemning as simply wrong or wicked (see 149). To avoid this contradiction, as well as to do full justice to the principle of merit, according to Strauss, "the city must transform itself into the 'world-state'" (see 149t and b). But to move to the "world-state" as the solution to the problem of justice is to move beyond any humanly achievable solution, "for no human being and no group of human beings"—not even the wise—"can rule the whole human race justly" (149). "Therefore," Strauss concludes, "what is divined in speaking of the 'world-state' as an all-comprehensive human society subject to one human government is in truth the cosmos ruled by God, which is then the only true city, or the city that is simply according to nature because it is the only city which is simply just" (149–50).

We cannot but be reminded here of Strauss' earlier reference to the City of God and the biblical solution to the problem of justice. Although the solution mentioned here is not specifically biblical, it is dependent on divine providence, as Strauss confirms in a long and important footnote that he appends to the argument just summarized (see 150n24). If divine providence is necessary, as he there says it is, for "true justice," then it would seem that the concern for justice itself can give one a powerful incentive to believe that the cosmos is ruled by God, even if that belief may pull one away to some extent from ordinary political life. But this is not the only possible response to the problem of justice. As Strauss writes near the beginning of the next paragraph, which proves to be one of the most radical in the whole book, "[t]here are still other reasons which force men to seek beyond the political sphere for perfect

justice, or, more generally, for the life that is truly according to nature" (151). The "or, more generally" here, like many such formulations in *Natural Right and History*, is ambiguous: Is Strauss merely reformulating, or is the "or" disjunctive, indicating an important difference between a movement "beyond the political sphere" in search of "perfect justice" and one in search of "the life that is truly according to nature"? Judging by what Strauss goes on to say in the rest of the paragraph, it would seem that there is an important difference. For he goes on to sketch, in almost shocking terms, the attitude of "the wise," not only toward rule, which they wish to avoid, but also toward "justice and moral virtue in general," which they regard as mere means to a life devoted to the pursuit of wisdom (151). Convinced that they have discovered a higher life, devoted to a higher object, the philosophers do not look at justice and moral virtue in general as does "the man who is merely just or moral without being a philosopher" (151). If such a man regards moral virtue as an end in itself and as the highest object of his striving, the philosophers regard it as a mere precondition of something else, and they regard the non-philosopher's virtue, which is not instrumental to wisdom, as "merely political or vulgar virtue" (151). It is thus a question, according to Strauss, whether the philosophers have not transcended "the dimension of morality in the politically relevant sense of the term" (151–2).

Strauss pulls back—a bit. The philosophers cannot and do not simply turn their backs on the city. Because they are dependent on the city and retain their natural affection for their fellow citizens, it is necessary for them "to descend again into the cave, i.e., to take care of the affairs of the city, whether in a direct or more remote manner" (152). In returning to the cave, however, the philosophers do not look at things in the same way as they did before they left. Because the city cannot be guided strictly or unqualifiedly by "the requirements of wisdom," its political life necessarily appears in a dimmer light. Strauss expresses this point somewhat obliquely by suggesting that natural right, understood now as identical with the requirements of wisdom, must be diluted in order to be politically beneficial rather than destructive (152–3). Strauss' emphasis on the need to dilute natural right serves a double purpose: it underscores the political moderation and sense of civic responsibility of the philosophers, but it also indicates the diminished esteem in which they hold the city and the compromised principles that must prevail there. And Strauss goes out of his way here to contrast the view of the classical philosophers, in the latter of these two aspects, with a position from the Christian tradition that drew a distinction between primeval natural right and secondary natural right: "If the principles valid in civil society are diluted natural right, they are much less venerable than if they are regarded as secondary natural right, i.e., as divinely

established and involving an absolute duty for fallen man. Only in the latter case is justice, as it is commonly understood, unquestionably good. Only in the latter case does natural right in the strict sense or primary natural right cease to be dynamite for civil society" (153).

Now, at this point Strauss turns away—or so it initially seems—from his discussion of the Socratic-Platonic natural right teaching. He turns first to a brief discussion of Cicero, then to a longer discussion of Aristotle, and finally to a brief discussion of Thomas Aquinas. What is the purpose of these discussions? It is hard to explain them by taxonomical considerations alone, especially since Strauss indicates that, contrary to first appearances, Cicero's and even Aristotle's teaching is in fundamental agreement with the Socratic-Platonic teaching (compare 154t with 154b and 155–6; compare 156–7 with 162–3). Let me offer, then, the following suggestion as to their purpose: Strauss wants, on the one hand, to continue to sketch key aspects of a single fundamental outlook shared by Socrates, Plato, Cicero, and Aristotle, and, on the other hand, to contrast that outlook ultimately with the alternative represented by Thomas. On the first front, we see from the discussion of Cicero something that has already been indicated, but not quite so clearly, about the Socratic-Platonic position: it is not based on a doctrine of divine providence or an anthropocentric teleology (see 154–5). And we learn from the discussion of Aristotle that the classic natural right teaching that Aristotle shares with Plato and Socrates (and Cicero) denies that there are any absolutely fixed or immutable rules of justice (see 158–63).⁶

In both of these respects, as well as others brought out earlier, the position of the Socratic philosophers differs from the position expressed in the Thomistic doctrine of natural law. Thomas, moreover, is only the most philosophically sophisticated of those who would disagree with the Socratic teaching. Strauss has repeatedly pointed, at key stages of his argument, to the alternative that eventually receives its fullest and final treatment in his discussion of Thomas—for instance, in his allusion to *City of God* (see again 144); in his statement about the cosmos ruled by God (see again 149–50); in his reference to the distinction between primeval and secondary natural right (see again 153); and in his statement of the Stoic view expressed but not shared by Cicero (see 154–5, especially the remarks about Laelius on 155). In each of these cases, the position that looks to divine providence for the ultimate solution to the problem of justice is juxtaposed with the Socratic philosophic position that turns instead to a way of life that does not depend on such theological convictions. In each case, too, Strauss has indicated that the divide between the two positions in

6 In the subsection on Aristotle, Strauss points his readers, in the only footnote of the subsection that refers to a text, to his own essay, "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*" (see note 32).

question is at once moral and theological—that is, the disagreement between them concerns both the status and character of the moral principles and the question of God's rule of the cosmos.

Strauss thus brings us back to one of the issues at the heart of *Natural Right and History* (see above, p. 133). But does he affirm what seems to be his most decisive statement in the book about that issue: "If we take a bird's-eye view of the secular struggle between philosophy and theology, we can hardly avoid the impression that neither of the two antagonists has ever succeeded in really refuting the other" (75)? Are we left, in other words, at a stand-off between two irreconcilable alternatives? Perhaps. But perhaps not, for insofar as the disagreement, as Strauss brings it out in Chapter Four, is not only theological but also moral, it would seem that there is at least some promising ground for argument and adjudication. In fact, there is one important point of agreement between the two sides: they agree as to the insufficiency of justice in its ordinary meaning (as "citizen-morality"), or, in other words, they agree that there is such a thing as "the problem of justice."⁷ This point of agreement, however, goes only so far, and the fact that the two positions in question respond so differently to the problem of justice suggests—as other features of Strauss' discussion confirm—that they do not understand that problem in exactly the same way. Strauss reaffirms this point at the beginning of his treatment of Thomas by pointing out that, unlike the Socratics (Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero), Thomas left no doubt as to the harmony between natural right and civil society, nor about the immutable character of the fundamental propositions of natural law (see 163). Thomas also denied the sufficiency of philosophic activity as the end of man; he thus avoided unambiguously claiming, as the Socratic philosophers unambiguously claimed or at least believed, that intellectual perfection is decisively higher than moral perfection (164–5).

Now, these differences on the plane of morality could well seem to be secondary to a more fundamental theological disagreement, which is not as open as they are to adjudication. Strauss even suggests as much by a remark he makes after laying out some of the ways in which Thomas' natural law doctrine departed from the Socratic natural right teaching: "It is reasonable to assume that these profound changes were due to the influence of the belief in biblical revelation" (163). But Strauss then wavers over the solidity of that assumption: "*If this assumption should prove correct...*" (163, emphasis added). And the note of doubt that he thus introduces becomes stronger when he goes on to indicate that, in Thomas' own presentation, the moral in some sense precedes

7 Compare Strauss (1979) 111: "we observe first a broad agreement between the Bible and Greek philosophy regarding both morality and the insufficiency of morality; the disagreement concerns that 'x' which completes morality."

the theological: “natural reason [according to Thomas] creates a presumption in favor of the divine law, which completes or perfects the natural law” (164; consider also the immediately following formulation: “At any rate, *the ultimate consequence* of the Thomistic view of natural law is that natural law is practically inseparable not only from natural theology—i.e., from a natural theology which is, in fact, based on belief in biblical revelation—but even from revealed theology” [emphasis added]). That Strauss thinks that Thomas was right to affirm, wittingly or unwittingly, a certain primacy of morality can also be seen in what he says in the same passage about the reaction of the early modern philosophers to the eventual absorption of natural law by theology: “The modern efforts,” Strauss writes, “were partly based on the premise, which would have been acceptable to the classics, that the moral principles have a greater evidence than the teachings even of natural theology and, therefore, that natural law or natural right should be kept independent of theology and its controversies” (164).⁸ If “the classics” would have accepted the crucial premise of the moderns, that is not to say that they would have interpreted its bearing in the same way. For the greater evidence of the moral principles can be seen, not only as a reason to sever natural right from “theology and its controversies,” but also—or instead—as a reason to make the moral principles one’s focus in trying to settle the most important question of theology.

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8 On the meaning and importance of this statement, see Bolotin (2001) 11.

“On Collingwood’s Philosophy of History” and “On a New Interpretation of Plato’s Political Philosophy”

Jonathan F. Culp

1 The Recovery of the Ancients and Its Obstacles

Strauss is well known for his call to recover the tradition of classical political philosophy and for his claim that a solution to the contemporary “crisis of the West” is unlikely to be found without a prior attempt to recover that tradition. Strauss identifies the “crisis of the West” with the advent of modern relativism—the belief that human reason is incapable of supplying human beings with universally valid guidance concerning the right or best way to live and to organize human society (Strauss [1953] 1–6; Strauss [1964] 1–8). Strauss sees relativism as the product of two powerful trends in modern thought: positivism and historicism (Strauss [1953] 8). Positivism holds that reason can arrive at true judgments about (natural or human) “facts,” but that “value judgments” are unscientific.¹ Historicism, though possessing several variants, fundamentally holds that all human thought is inescapably relative to its particular time and place or culture, which in turn seems to imply that all human thought is valid *only* for its particular time and place: human thought cannot ascend to universally true judgments.² Both positivism and historicism support the conclusion that human conduct cannot be supplied with a fully rational foundation. According to Strauss, this belief underlies the crisis of the West precisely because the West has for centuries understood itself to be the bearer of universal principles (science and the rights of man). With the very existence of universal principles increasingly questioned or rejected, the West is left unsure of itself and in need of guidance that it cannot quite believe could ever be available (Strauss [1964] 1–4; Strauss [1975] 81–82).

1 See Strauss (1953) 35–80 (“Natural Right and the Distinction between Facts and Values”) and Strauss (1968) 203–23 (“An Epilogue”) for Strauss’ critique of social science positivism.

2 Two of Strauss’ best known treatments of historicism can be found at Strauss (1953) 9–34 (“Natural Right and the Historical Approach”) and Strauss (1959) 56–77 (“Political Philosophy and History”).

Positivism and historicism contradict not only the universalistic aspirations of the modern West, but also the rationalism of classical philosophy, which looked to “nature” in order to discover universal, rational guidance for human life.³ Strauss’ call for a recovery of classical political philosophy therefore rests on three claims: that positivism and historicism are based on highly questionable premises; that they are, at the same time, the logical outcome of the principles of modern philosophy as those were first formulated by the likes of Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, and Descartes; and that modern philosophy’s initial rejection of the classics may have lacked sufficient grounds, and thus that the victory of moderns over the ancients (despite the evident successes of modern natural science) may have been too hastily declared.⁴

Thus, Strauss calls for a recovery of classical philosophy as part of his call for a resumption of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. He holds out the possibility that, even though the ancients cannot supply the contemporary West with direct solutions to its problems, the recovery of classical principles is an absolutely necessary prelude to the discovery of those solutions (see Strauss [1964] 11). Such a recovery, according to Strauss, will not be easy, because modern prejudices make it extremely difficult to arrive at a “historically objective” or accurate understanding of the classics. It is very difficult to understand the classics “exactly as they understood themselves.”⁵ Yet a “free and impartial” comparison of classical and modern principles requires that both parties be understood in their own terms, rather than that they be distorted or caricatured.⁶

The two critical reviews under discussion in this essay both concern a number of specific obstacles that stand in the way of an adequate understanding of the classical authors. “On Collingwood’s Philosophy of History” (Strauss [1952]) demonstrates several ways in which historicism, while purporting to make possible an accurate understanding of past thought, in fact makes just such an understanding impossible. “On a New Interpretation of Plato’s Political Philosophy” (Strauss [1946]) demonstrates a number of ways in which an overhasty desire to vindicate the ancients and to derive direct practical solutions from them also leads to misunderstanding them. Both reviews are long, complex, and at times either elusive or obscure. Both could bear a more sustained analysis than I could possibly supply here. Hence I will focus hereafter

3 See Strauss (1953) 81–164 (“The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right” and “Classic Natural Right”).

4 See Strauss (1975) and Strauss (1959) 9–55 (“What is Political Philosophy?”).

5 See Strauss (1946) 328–29, for example.

6 Strauss (1946), 327.

specifically on Strauss' account in them of the obstacles to a genuine recovery of the ancients, beginning with the review of Collingwood.⁷

2 Collingwood and the Distortions of Historicism

It is not entirely clear why Strauss wrote his review of R.G. Collingwood's *Idea of History*.⁸ Much of the review is concerned with criticizing the internal consistency of Collingwood's philosophy of history and the distorted understanding of the ancients that his historicism produces. Yet Strauss had already twice in print discussed the problematic character of historicism,⁹ and his treatment of Collingwood overlaps with those earlier discussions in several ways. What's more, he makes it clear in *Natural Right and History* that he considers the "radical historicism" of Heidegger a more internally consistent and formidable form of historicism than that which Collingwood represents.¹⁰ Although Strauss never explicitly declares his motivation for writing the review, he seems to have written it not because he saw Collingwood's brand of historicism as particularly formidable, but rather because it is representative of a more common and thus more influential brand than that of Heidegger.¹¹ Thus, his critique of Collingwood might reach a different audience and have a different effect than his other critiques of historicism.

7 Tarcov (1991) plausibly argues that "On a New Interpretation" serves as an indirect introduction to Strauss' own project of recovery of classical political philosophy, which at the time of the review (1946) had hardly yet appeared in print.

8 The best overall source of information regarding Collingwood's life and thought remains his own autobiography: Collingwood (1939).

9 Strauss (1953) 9–34 ("Natural Right and the Historical Approach") and Strauss (1959) 56–77 ("Political Philosophy and History"). It should be noted that "Natural Right and the Historical Approach" was first published separately as Strauss (1950)—that is, prior to "Collingwood's Philosophy of History."

10 See Strauss (1953) 25–29. In a letter dated September 28, 1960, Strauss tells Willmoore Kendall that Collingwood's "deepest motivation, radicalized beyond recognition, and carried through with a much greater intellectual power, leads to Heidegger" (Murley and Alvis [2002] 230).

11 He notes, for example, that Collingwood's philosophy of history is further advanced toward a goal to which Collingwood's colleagues were also moving (with varying degrees of self-awareness) (Strauss [1952] 562–63). In the second session of his 1956 course on "Historicism and Modern Relativism," Strauss also remarks that Collingwood is representative of a more common view of historicism—in that context, it is by contrast to the rationalist historicism of Kojève, but the same basic point holds; see Strauss (Winter Quarter 1956) Session 2.

A full account of Collingwood's book is not necessary in order to grasp the essentials of Strauss' critique. In brief, the *Idea of History* gives an account of the rise of modern "scientific history,"¹² as well as an account of its character.¹³ In addition, it defends the proposition that self-knowledge or knowledge of human nature is essentially historical in character.¹⁴ Scientific history is relatively recent, having reached maturity only in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵ Its essential characteristics are as follows.¹⁶ Scientific history seeks to understand past human actions by understanding the thought of the historical agents who performed them.¹⁷ It seeks that understanding through the rigorous interrogation of historical evidence, with a view toward re-thinking or "re-enacting" the exact thoughts of those historical agents. Thus, scientific history seeks to understand the thought of historical agents (including past thinkers) exactly as they understood it themselves. In thus interpreting and understanding past thought, however, scientific history also necessarily "criticizes" (that is, evaluates) such thought, since, even though the scientific historian seeks to understand past events "from the inside," he cannot help but re-think past thoughts within the context of his own present-day knowledge and perspective. Thus, as Strauss summarizes it, "Scientific history is . . . the effort to see the human past in its entirety as it appears from the standpoint of the present of the historian's civilization" (Strauss [1952] 561).

For Collingwood, the advent of scientific history reveals the broader need to develop a philosophy of history or—more precisely—to reconceive of philosophy as an essentially historical discipline.¹⁸ Strauss summarizes the logic of Collingwood's position as follows:

it was always admitted that the central theme of philosophy is the question of what man is, and that history is the knowledge of what men have

12 Collingwood (1946) 14–204.

13 Collingwood (1946) 1–13, 205–334.

14 Collingwood (1946) 205–31. As Connelly (2010, 88) notes, the *Idea of History* is not really a "book" but rather a posthumous compilation of materials only loosely in accord with the plan for a book that Collingwood had in mind and had only partially completed. Connelly (2010) should be consulted for its critique of elements of Strauss' interpretation of Collingwood.

15 Collingwood (1946) 254.

16 Here, I summarize the account that Strauss offers of Collingwood's conception of scientific history at Strauss (1952) 560–61. Relevant citations to Collingwood (1946) can be found therein.

17 "All history is history of thought" (Collingwood [1946] 215, cited at Strauss [1952] 560).

18 Collingwood (1946) 6–7.

done; but now it has been realized that man is what he can do, and 'the only clue to what man can do' is what he had done (10); therefore, 'the so-called science of human nature or of the human mind resolves itself into history' (220, 209). (Strauss [1952] 560)¹⁹

As Strauss puts it, Collingwood recognized the need for "the fusion of philosophy and history," and it is this recognition which puts Collingwood in advance of his similarly-minded peers (Strauss [1952] 562–63).

In the remaining discussion, I will focus on two primary objections Strauss poses to Collingwood's philosophy of history and its premises: that it is internally self-contradictory; and that it renders genuine understanding of past thought impossible.²⁰

2.1 *The Self-Contradictory Character of Collingwood's Historicism*

Strauss argues that Collingwood's historicism is internally contradictory because he vacillates between two "mutually incompatible" species of historicism (Strauss [1952] 561–64). Thus, for example, although Collingwood consistently maintains that scientific history criticizes past thought from the standpoint of the present, he offers two mutually contradictory justifications for this claim, each deriving from one of the two incompatible species of historicism. Sometimes, the claim that scientific history is necessarily critical seems to rest on the notion that human self-knowledge is progressive in character, such that the standpoint of the present is theoretically superior to the past.²¹ Strauss calls this the "rationalistic view" of history (Strauss [1952] 563). Other times, Collingwood speaks as though the standpoint of each epoch or civilization is perfectly valid for those who belong to it. That being the case, and the future being essentially unknowable, it follows that it is not only valid but unavoidable that a historian criticize and even interpret the past from the standpoint of his own present.²² Strauss calls this the "non-rationalistic view"

19 Internal citations are to Collingwood (1946).

20 In a long and somewhat obscure paragraph, Strauss also contends that Collingwood is insufficiently aware of historicism's indebtedness to the questionable premises of modern philosophy (and Hobbes in particular) (see Strauss [1952] 572–73). There is not space here to unpack that paragraph adequately.

21 See Strauss (1952) 561–64 for supporting evidence for this claim. The chief evidence, of course, is that Collingwood's history of historiography is teleologically oriented toward the advent of properly scientific history (Strauss [1952] 561–62).

22 Again, see Strauss (1952) 561–64 (especially 562) for supporting citations.

of history (Strauss [1952] 563), since it does not suppose the superiority of the present or the progressive character of history.

Collingwood fails to recognize that he holds these two “mutually incompatible” views (Strauss [1952] 563). It is difficult to see, however, how such an internally inconsistent view could supply one with an adequate understanding of past thought. Strauss suggests, for example, that this internal inconsistency leads to Collingwood to make at least four pairs of contradictory judgments (Strauss [1952] 563–64).

2.2 *Historicism Destroys the Incentive Necessary to Read Classical Authors Accurately*

Apart from this general criticism, and apart from offering numerous examples of Collingwood's simple misunderstandings of classical authors (see Strauss [1952] 568–72), Strauss' primary criticism of Collingwood's philosophy of history is that it is constitutionally incapable of achieving its stated goal of understanding historical agents exactly as they understood themselves (Strauss [1952] 573–75). It is especially incapable of comprehending the thought of past philosophers.²³ This failure stems from the fact that historicism destroys the “philosophic motive” necessary for interpreting the classical authors accurately.

Whether one holds the rationalistic or the non-rationalistic view of history, insofar as one is a historicist, and thus holds to the view that human thought is essentially relative to particular times and places or cultures, one is committed to the view that almost all past philosophies were “defective in the decisive respect” (Strauss [1952] 574), since nearly all past philosophers implicitly rejected this historicist thesis. They spoke and wrote as though knowledge of trans-historical or universal truths is possible, or at least as though the quest for such knowledge is justified. Yet that is precisely what the historicist denies. From the historicist perspective,

every earlier age [and any philosopher who might have been its product] erroneously “absolutized” the standpoint from which it looked at things and therefore was incapable of taking very seriously the thought of other ages: hence earlier ages were incapable of scientific history. (Strauss [1952] 574)

They therefore failed to understand human nature or the human mind.

23 Strauss suggests that Herodotus and Thucydides ought to be provisionally included in this class; see Strauss (1952) 579–80.

If, however, all earlier thought is defective in this regard, it is not possible to take it seriously, since, according to Strauss, it is possible to take a thinker seriously only to the extent that one thinks it possible that there is some decisively important truth to learn from him. Stated in terms of the history of thought, this means that taking a past thinker seriously requires that one believe that "the thought of the past is superior to the thought of the present day in the decisive respect" (Strauss [1952] 576). The historicist is incapable of believing this, since past thinkers lacked insight into the historical character of all human thought. He thus "knows" ahead of time that they did not know what they were doing.

The inevitable result is that the historicist will fail to "re-enact" the thought of past philosophers adequately. This holds true for both the rationalistic and the non-rationalistic variety of historicism. The rational or progressive historicist will necessarily seek to understand the thought of the past "better" than it understood itself, because he will understand it not in its own terms but in terms of its contribution to future progress.²⁴ The non-rationalistic historicist will not attempt to understand past thinkers better than they understood themselves, but he will (perhaps despite himself) consider them decisively theoretically inferior, and he will necessarily understand them differently than they understood themselves. He will consider them theoretically inferior because, as already noted, he recognizes that past thinkers lacked the alleged insight into the historicity of all human thought. And he will understand past thinkers (even philosophers) differently than they understood themselves because he will tend to understand them not on their own terms but as more or less unconscious mouthpieces for the worldview of their culture or civilization. To mention a few examples of this tendency, Collingwood contends that Plato's *Republic* is not a statement of timeless truths about the nature of politics, but rather the expression of the Greek ideal of the *polis*.²⁵ He also contends that the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides are shaped (and marred) by the "substantialist" and "humanist" presuppositions characteristic of the "Greek mind" of their authors.²⁶ Strauss contends, to the contrary, that a more careful attention to these authors would show that what Collingwood mistakes for an expression of a "Greek ideal" or a tendency of the "Greek mind" is in fact a reflection of the properly philosophic motivations of the author in question (see Strauss [1952] 569, for example). Overall, the historicist will view past thought as a "spectator" rather than enter into it, because he will read past

²⁴ See Strauss (1959) 67.

²⁵ Collingwood (1946) 229, cited at Strauss (1952) 575).

²⁶ See Collingwood (1946) 40–45 and Strauss' critique at Strauss (1952) 568–73.

philosophers not as potential discoverers of universally valid truths, but rather as products of their particular time and place—one superseded by the historian's own. He will fail, therefore, to read them with sufficient care.

Thus, any adequate recovery of classical thought has at least two preconditions: it must have a “philosophic incentive,” and, consequently, it must begin by provisionally doubting the truth of the historicist thesis (Strauss [1952] 575–76). This would be true even if, after full and careful examination, that thesis turns out to be correct. Failure to do so leads to the gross misunderstandings Strauss exposes in Collingwood's book.

3 Wild's Failed Recovery of the Ancients

Historicism may perhaps be the greatest obstacle to a genuine recovery of classical political philosophy, but it is not the only one. Although it might sound strange, given that Strauss is generally known for his call for a recovery of classical political philosophy as a necessary part of any attempt to resolve the crisis of the West, and given his avowed preference for classical natural right over modern natural right (much less over historicism or social science positivism) (see Strauss [1953] vii), Strauss consistently held that another serious obstacle to the recovery of the classical teaching lies in too much eagerness to resolve the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns *in favor of the ancients* and, thus, to find the solutions to our modern problems directly in their teachings. Strauss counsels on more than one occasion that a resolution to the crisis of modernity requires “a detached, theoretical, impartial discussion” that does not pass judgment on the ancients and the moderns until their respective positions have been adequately understood (Strauss [1953] 7; see also Strauss 327–28). The return to the classics is thus “tentative or experimental” (Strauss [1964] 11). If, however, we assume the ancients superior and we “squint” too much at our modern problems while reading them, we will necessarily misunderstand them; we will be moved to “modernize or distort” them, with possibly “disastrous consequences” (Strauss [1964] 11; Strauss [1946] 332–33).

This is largely the lesson of Strauss' review of John Wild's *Plato's Theory of Man*.²⁷ Wild²⁸ sets out in the book to re-present for a modern audience Plato's

²⁷ Wild (1981), reviewed in Strauss (1946).

²⁸ On John Wild and his career, see Sugarman and Duncan (2006). It is worth noting that, although he studied with Heidegger in Freiburg 1930–31, the latter did not have any apparent influence on his thinking at the time beyond giving him an interest in the ancients. Throughout 1940s and part of the 1950s, Wild was a proponent of philosophical “realism,”

(and to a lesser extent Aristotle's) "realistic" account of human nature and the "natural order which must guide men's endeavors in striving for a healthy cultural state".²⁹ A full summary of his book is unnecessary here. His basic theses are as follows. The disasters of modern irrationalism, barbarism, and tyranny (particularly as manifested in the rise of Nazism and the Second World War) are the ultimate practical result of modern philosophy's "idealistic" or subjectivistic rejection of the "realism" of classical philosophy. Modern philosophy rests on the premise that all knowledge is ultimately a mental construction of the human subject. This implicit denial of objective knowledge leads to a denial that there is a "real order" in accordance with which man must live, to a "scorn for reason" of any sort other than calculative, and to a "contempt for the individual person."³⁰ Its ultimate result is a "cultural inversion" of the proper "hierarchical structure of human culture."³¹ Wild argues that modern idealism is essentially identical to ancient sophistry, and he holds that Plato's theory of culture is both a true account of the natural human order and a source for the diagnosing and curing of the effects of modern idealistic sophistry. Only a return to classical philosophy will allow the West to overcome its increasingly debilitating maladies.

Strauss emphatically grants that the question underlying Wild's book is of the utmost importance—that question being "the legitimacy of the modern approach in all its forms, as distinguished from the classical approach" (Strauss [1946] 326). Strauss finds much to object to in Wild's book, however. Overall, the review suggests that Wild's lamentable interpretations of Plato (and Aristotle) are largely the result of an overhasty desire to get "results" or to extract answers to modern problems from Plato's teaching (Strauss [1946] 332–35). As a result, Wild consistently distorts the positions he discusses, commits numerous anachronisms, and even (unintentionally) makes it look like "rational authoritarianism" is the Platonic solution to modern tyranny and irrationalism.³² Wild's book is an object lesson in how *not* to recover the ancients.

purportedly derived from Plato and Aristotle. Over the course of the 1950s he developed an increasing interest in existential phenomenology and Heidegger in particular, and he came to abandon his prior "realism." He went on to become one of the most influential early proponents of phenomenology in the United States. For more on this, see Woessner (2010) 29–30, 195–99, and Sugarman and Duncan (2006) xvii–xxii.

29 Wild (1981) v.

30 Wild (1981) 2.

31 Wild (1981) 3, 4.

32 See Strauss (1946) 364–67 for this last claim, which I will not be examining here.

In the remainder of the discussion, I will focus on Strauss' critique of five specific errors committed by Wild that can be attributed to his overhasty desire to vindicate and to apply the ancient teachings: Wild's anachronistic application of a teaching about the *polis* to the modern state; his misunderstanding of modern philosophy and of the weaknesses of ancient philosophy that it was responding to; his assumption of an essential harmony between classical philosophy and Biblical revelation; his assumption of an essential harmony between philosophy and society; and his attendant failure to appreciate the esoteric character of Plato's writings.

3.1 *Modernizing Distortions*

According to Strauss, Wild's argument presupposes rather than establishes his answer to the "fundamental question" concerning the ancients and the moderns. Wild "considers it definitely settled in favor of the classics" (Strauss [1946] 332). Wild thus feels free to devote the bulk of the book to his "practical or political intention" of reforming modern social life "on the foundation of the classical political teaching"—with "dangerous consequences," according to Strauss (Strauss [1946] 332). He insists to the contrary that "[t]he teaching of the classics can have no immediate practical effect, because present-day society is not a *polis*" (Strauss [1946] 332).³³ He notes, for example, that the modern state is much larger than the ancient *polis*—a factor of decisive importance in the eyes of the classics. He also notes the presence in modern societies of "ideologies" and of "popularized science," to which there was no ancient analogue (Strauss [1946] 332–33).

Since modern society (or the modern state) is qualitatively different from the political community treated by the classics, any direct application of the classics to modern society requires a modernization or distortion of classical principles (Strauss [1946] 332–33). In other words, an *immediately* practically-oriented presentation of the principles of classical political philosophy is necessarily a *misrepresentation*. If, however, a genuine recovery of classical principles is necessary in order to arrive at an adequate assessment of our contemporary situation, it follows that Wild's approach obscures rather than clarifies our situation and impedes a genuine recovery of the classics.

This obscurity is compounded by the fact that Wild knowingly does not write a simply historical account of Plato's entire philosophy or his theory of

33 Although Strauss does not say explicitly what the "dangerous consequences" of Wild's anachronism are, his subsequent discussion suggests at least two: (1) a distorted presentation of Plato that (2) plays into the hands of those who charge Plato with being a proto-totalitarian (see Strauss [1946] 363–67).

man, but rather makes use of parts of Plato's philosophy for the purpose of illuminating particular modern problems (Strauss [1946] 333). Strauss argues that it is not legitimate or illuminating to make selective use of a part of the teaching of a classical philosopher until after the whole teaching has been recovered, since until that point, one cannot view the parts in light of the whole to which they belong—which is tantamount to saying that one cannot understand that part as its author understood it. Thus, any selection and presentation of a part of that philosophy will be "arbitrary" and determined by "modern predilections" (Strauss [1946] 334). One will present a modernized and distorted version of that philosophy, where aspects of that teaching are grafted onto an otherwise alien framework. "If it is true that *la querelle des anciens et des modernes* is the paramount issue," Strauss argues, "one merely blurs that issue by substituting for a downright modern teaching a modernized Platonic teaching" (Strauss [1946] 334). One must recover Plato's thought as a whole before one could make use of it in a manner consistent with that philosophy. Wild fails to recognize this fact.

3.2 *Underestimating the Moderns and Overestimating the Ancients*

Quite often, Wild presents German idealism as the antithesis to Platonic "realism." He tends to hold German idealism proximately to blame for modern tyranny,³⁴ but—Strauss contends—he can do so only because he badly mischaracterizes that philosophical school (Strauss [1946] 336–38). Strauss traces this "inability to do justice to modern philosophy" to a more fundamental defect: Wild's "failure to give serious consideration to the question why modern philosophy revolted against the classical tradition, in other words, to the difficulties to which classical philosophy was and still is exposed" (Strauss [1946] 338). One might say, then, that the superficial estimation of the defects of modern philosophy stems from a superficial estimation of the strength of ancient political philosophy.

Strauss presents an account of classical philosophy's difficulties in two rather dense paragraphs (Strauss [1946] 338–39).³⁵ In an admitted simplification, Strauss asserts that "[c]lassical science . . . depends on the possibility of natural theology as a science," since, "[a]ccording to the classics, science presupposes that the world is intelligible," and that supposition can only be justified if "intelligence" in some way "rule[s] the world" (Strauss [1946] 338). Strauss then suggests that the conflict between the Biblical account of creation and the Aristotelian doctrine of the "eternity of the visible universe" led many,

34 See Wild (1981) 2–3.

35 These paragraphs can be usefully compared with Strauss (1953) 7–8 and 166–77.

including “adherents” to the classical view, to begin to question that view. He further adds that

a case could be made for the view that it was reflection guided by the Biblical notion of creation which ultimately led to the doctrine that the world as created by God, or the ‘thing-in-itself,’ is inaccessible to human knowledge, or to the idealistic assertion that the world as far as we can understand it, that is, the world as studied by human science, must be the ‘work’ of the human mind. (Strauss [1946] 338)

Wild tends to attribute these latter doctrines to modern philosophy’s willfully unjustified rejection of the classics. It could be, Strauss suggests, that they are legitimate responses to real weaknesses of classical science.³⁶

At the same time that Wild fails to consider the questionable character of classical science, he also seeks retain the accomplishments of “modern science” without explaining (or even acknowledging the need to explain) how modern science can be coherently integrated into the seemingly quite alien theoretical framework of classical philosophy (Strauss [1946] 339). Concomitantly, Wild fails to appreciate the extent to which modern natural science “has brought about a situation in which the possibility of natural theology has lost all the evidence it formally possessed”—which possibility Strauss has already said to be a presupposition of the classical science Wild purportedly defends (Strauss [1946] 339). Classical natural theology is inseparable from a teleological account of nature that modern natural science has rendered thoroughly questionable (see Strauss [1953] 7–8).

Resolving the question of the legitimacy of the modern rejection of classical science goes far beyond the scope of “On a New Interpretation” (or this essay),

36 Despite the appended note to the above-quoted passage (Strauss [1946] 338 n. 8), Strauss could hardly have expected many of his readers to understand this cryptic suggestion that modern “idealism” was the result of “reflection guided by the Biblical notion of creation.” He is apparently alluding to his claim in the unpublished *Hobbes’s Critique of Religion* (Strauss 2011) that Hobbes’s “methodological materialism” has its roots in an attempt to refute the possibility of miracles by initially granting the possibility that the world is the unintelligible product of a mysterious creator God and in the attendant attempt to found science on mental constructs freely created by the human subject and thus not dependent upon an intelligible nature given through the senses (see especially Strauss [2011] 85–94; see also Burns [2014] 133–39).

but it is safe to say that Wild underestimates the difficulties involved in the question concerning the intelligibility of the world.³⁷

3.3 *The Assumed Harmony of Classical Philosophy and Biblical Revelation*

Strauss intimates in various places that Wild's understanding of the classics is informed and indeed distorted by certain Biblical premises, and that his overall account of Plato's "theory of culture" is marred by a complacent assumption that classical philosophy and Biblical revelation are essentially harmonious.

For example, Wild at times identifies "sophistry" (which includes German idealism and modern philosophy generally) with "idolatry" or with the "vain philosophy" and the "science falsely so called" mentioned in St. Paul's epistles. He seems, that is, to see sophistry as rooted in a culpable pride or willful ignorance, even though Plato consistently holds that all vice is ignorance (Strauss [1946] 344). Strauss goes so far as to suggest that Wild's propensity to see sophistry as "the 'inversion' of philosophy" stems from the fact that "he reads Plato in the spirit not of Plato but of the Bible" (Strauss [1946] 344). That is, Wild interprets as prideful sin what Plato presents as ridiculous ignorance. As Strauss says elsewhere, "Indignation is a bad counselor" (Strauss [1953] 6).

Perhaps more indicative of Wild's "Biblicizing" of Plato is his treatment of the idea of the good. On one hand, Wild suggests in some places that philosophers can never attain full knowledge of the good, and supports this contention by reference to the *Phaedo*.³⁸ That would suggest that the best political order could never be actualized, since the latter order rests on the premise that philosophers do have such knowledge. On the other hand, Wild clearly speaks of the Platonic order as something that can be realized. Strauss reconciles these two discordant statements by noting that Wild makes the "suggestion" that "philosophy must be subordinated to theology," which reveals a "tacit assumption" that "[d]ivine revelation, and not philosophy, supplies that sufficient knowledge of the idea of the good which is indispensable for the actualization of the perfect social order" (Strauss [1946] 362–63). Strauss argues that this subordination of philosophy to revelation and, hence, theology explains what is bound to strike many readers of Wild's book as a bizarre notion: namely, that "the Platonic-Christian state" or the "rational or Platonic state" that Wild discerns in Plato's teaching has been historically exemplified

37 Elsewhere, Strauss asserts that classical natural right, at least, does not in fact depend upon cosmology; thus, even if "science" presupposes the intelligibility of the world (and, hence, cosmology), the science of natural right may not (see Strauss [1959] 38–39).

38 See Strauss (1946) 362 n. 48 for the relevant Wild (1981) citations.

by the early Christian Church.³⁹ Wild thus conflates what Plato never conflates: the rule of priests and the rule of philosophers (Strauss [1946] 363).

Although Strauss never explicitly says so, he clearly suggests that Wild's apparent commitment to the truth of Christianity causes him to misread Plato. The harmony of Christianity and Platonic "realism" is never a *question* for him. But Wild's commitment to Christianity is but one of the distorting factors at work in his interpretation of Plato, and Strauss does not go so far as to suggest that *any* commitment to Christianity (or to Biblical orthodoxy more generally) necessarily distorts one's understanding of classical philosophy (see Strauss [1946] 344–45). In Wild's case, it is a failure to take seriously the question of the relation between philosophy and theology or revelation. Anyone who wishes to defend the Western "tradition" must be more mindful of this question than Wild.

3.4 *The Assumed Harmony between Philosophy and Society*

Partly as a result of his assumed harmony between Plato and the Bible, Wild goes on to make a further assumption that distorts his interpretation of Plato: namely, that there is a natural harmony between philosophy and society (Strauss [1946] 360–64). As already noted, Wild's book is an attempt to show that "our democratic way of life" and "the living aspirations of our time" are best supported by Plato's political teaching.⁴⁰ Wild supports this claim, among other ways, by arguing that the modern belief in individual rights originates from the Platonic assertion that the individual is superior to the state.⁴¹ He further asserts that, for Plato, "all men are philosophers" and that "wisdom 'is accessible to all.'"⁴² Wild even denies that Plato's regime is an "aristocracy." It is, rather, a "classless society" where "all phases or parts of the state are ruled by wisdom which belongs to no special individual or group."⁴³

Both of these claims—that Plato asserts the superiority of the human individual as such to the state, and that his regime is classless because wisdom is accessible to all—would, if true, go some way toward showing Plato to be a source of theoretical support for liberal democracy. Both claims are, of course, false. As Strauss points out, Plato's assertion that the individual is superior to the state does not apply to men as such but only to philosophers (Strauss [1946] 358), and philosophers "are extremely rare" (Strauss [1946] 359).

39 See Wild (1981) 108–10.

40 Wild (1981) vi, 8; cited at Strauss (1946) 357.

41 See Strauss (1946) 357–58, which includes the relevant Wild (1981) citations.

42 Strauss (1946) 358–59, citing Wild (1981) 275, 108.

43 Wild (1981) 107; cited at Strauss (1946) 359 n. 42.

If, however, "wisdom constitutes the only absolutely valid title to rule," and if "wisdom . . . requires certain very rare natural gifts," it follows that "natural inequality among men as regards intellectual gifts is politically decisive": Plato indeed presents an aristocratic teaching, according to which "democracy is against natural right" (Strauss [1946] 359). In other words, whereas modern liberal democracy rests on the premise that natural inequalities are irrelevant with regard to natural right, for Plato, natural inequality is decisive (see Strauss [1946] 357).

Wild's assertions that "all men are philosophers" and that the wisdom governing Plato's regime is not the special possession of any one class are attempts to get around the *Republic's* otherwise obvious inegalitarianism, and as such they exhibit one of the worst anachronisms of his Plato interpretation. Indeed, the claim that all men are philosophers reveals Wild's simple failure to read Plato with sufficient care, since it is Protagoras, not Socrates or any other Platonic spokesman, who asserts that all men are philosophers.⁴⁴ The notion that Plato's regime is classless rests on the same failure, since Plato quite explicitly refers to its constituent parts as classes (Strauss [1946] 359–60). Wild is able to assert that the Platonic regime is classless because, in Strauss' words, he "simply substitutes for Plato's rule of philosophers, that is, of a specific type of men, the 'rule' of philosophy, that is, the 'rule' of popularized philosophy or science over the minds of the whole citizen-body" (Strauss [1946] 360). Yet this is one of Wild's most egregious anachronisms, for, unbeknownst to him, this notion of wisdom or science is characteristic not of the classical authors but rather of modern philosophers such as Bacon, Hobbes, and Descartes, all of whom promoted a "democratic" concept of science which served as "the philosophic basis of popular enlightenment" (Strauss [1946] 360).

Thus, the desire to derive political principles supportive of democracy directly from Plato's writings leads, yet again, to a modernized distortion of that teaching. We should not conclude from this, however, that Strauss thought that *no* support whatsoever for liberal democracy can be derived from Plato's philosophy. As Tarcov notes, Strauss elsewhere suggests just the opposite.⁴⁵ He is not contradicting himself. As should be evident by now, Wild consistently goes wrong in his Plato interpretation because he attempts to derive support for liberal democracy *directly* from Plato writings. Hence, he reads the *Republic*—a book which implies that democracy is against natural right—as stating that democracy is the embodiment of natural right. Yet what might be

44 "Wild unwittingly characterizes as sophistic the view that he attributes to Plato" (Strauss [1946] 359).

45 See Tarcov (1991) 4 and 4 n. 3; see also Strauss (1975) 98.

against natural right simply might be the best approximation of natural right under certain circumstances.⁴⁶ Strauss seems to have thought this. At the very least, in the Wild review he leaves it an open question. Further, he shows that the relation between the principles of classical political philosophy and modern liberal democracy must *remain* an open question so long as one is still seeking to recover the principles of classical political philosophy. One will never find them, however, if one only goes looking for them in, so to speak, the liberal-democratic neck of the woods.

3.5 *The Failure to Recognize the Implications of Plato's Esotericism*

Wild's evident desire to assert the natural harmony of philosophy and society leads to what is perhaps the gravest defect of his manner of interpreting Plato: namely, his inability to appreciate the esoteric character of Plato's writing (Strauss [1946] 348–55). Wild recognizes at times that Plato's writing has an "exoteric" character,⁴⁷ but he fails to see that this exoteric character is dictated precisely by the natural *disharmony* of philosophy and society. More generally stated, although Wild accepts the authenticity of Plato's *Seventh Letter*, he does not consider sufficiently the difficulties that that letter creates for any attempt to discover "Plato's esoteric or serious teaching" (Strauss [1946] 348).⁴⁸

In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato says that he has never written a book about the subjects with which he is most seriously concerned, and that no one who understood those subjects would write a book about them. The rare few who are capable of understanding "nature's highest and first things" do not need a full exposition: they "are capable of discovering [those principles] by themselves by means of slight indication." On the other hand, the communication of such things to those incapable of understanding them leads only to a harmful and unjustified contempt or pride.⁴⁹ Thus, Plato's understanding of the most serious subjects is not "communicable as other teachings are" (Strauss [1946] 349). Wild fails to recognize the obvious implications of these statements for his interpretation of Plato, which treats the statements of his "spokesmen" in the various dialogues as more-or-less reflecting Plato's own convictions.

Strauss could have left it at noting Wild's failure to consider this problem, since that would be sufficient to undermine the entire thesis of Wild's book. Instead, Strauss goes on to offer guidance regarding how to read Plato's

46 See Strauss (1959) 86–87.

47 See Strauss (1946) 348 n. 25 for supporting citations to Wild (1981).

48 The relevant section of the *Seventh Letter* is 341b–344d.

49 Strauss (1946) 349, 350, drawing on *Seventh Letter* 341b–e and 344c–d. I have reproduced Strauss' translations of terms from these passages.

dialogues in light of the *Seventh Letter*.⁵⁰ He observes that the *Seventh Letter* does not "absolutely condemn the attempt to communicate [Plato's] serious teaching in writing" (Strauss [1946] 349); it merely constrains how such a teaching could be communicated. In light of Plato's statements concerning the few who are capable of understanding and the many who are not, Strauss interprets the constraints on Plato's writings as follows:

According to the *Seventh Letter* nothing would have prevented Plato from writing about the highest subjects in such a way as to give subtle hints to those for whom those hints would suffice, and thus not to communicate anything at all about the highest subjects to the large majority of readers. (350).

Strauss then supplies textual evidence to support this contention (see Strauss [1946] 350 n. 29). He refers the reader, for example, to the various hesitations and statements of inadequacy surrounding the discussion of the idea of the good in the *Republic*. More generally, his Platonic citations show that the dialogues contain several moments where the primary speaker admits that topics of crucial importance are being either omitted or treated with insufficient precision. From these considerations, Strauss draws his well known conclusion that "the dialogues have the function not of communicating but of intimating the most important truths to 'some,' while they have at the same time the much more obvious function of producing a salutary (civilizing, humanizing and cathartic) effect on all" (350).

These constraints on Plato's manner of writing further entail that "the rules of exactness governing the interpretation of Plato's books are much stricter than those governing the interpretation of most books" (Strauss [1946] 351–52). Relying implicitly on the *Phaedrus*,⁵¹ Strauss argues that the only way to work oneself towards an adequate understanding of Plato is to take seriously the form in which Plato wrote: namely, dialogues. The "content" of the dialogues ("the speeches of his various characters") must be interpreted in light of the "form" in which that content is couched ("the dialogic form in general, the

50 As Tarcov (1991, 14–15) has noted, this discussion of Plato's manner of writing (Strauss [1946] 349–55) is one of his clearest and most helpful. Unlike the related discussion of Plato's esotericism in *City and Man* (50–55), in the Wild review Strauss relies primarily on the *Seventh Letter* and only secondarily on the *Phaedrus*.

51 *Phaedrus* 264b–c and 275d–276a, cited at Strauss (1964) 53 n. 4 in the context of a similar conversation.

particular form of each dialogue and each section of it, the action, the characters, names, places, times, situations, and the like”) (Strauss [1946] 352).

It is important to note, however, and it is especially clear here, that Strauss does not assert that reading the dialogues in this way will lead directly to an understanding of Plato’s serious teaching. The esoteric teaching is not communicated in full “between the lines”—only “slight indications” of it. That is, “Plato does not relieve [his reader] of the responsibility for discovering the decisive part of the argument by himself” (Strauss [1946] 351).⁵² More fully: “An adequate understanding of the dialogues would enable the reader to discover the decisive indications of Plato’s serious teaching. It would not supply him with ready-made answers to Plato’s ultimate and most important questions” (Strauss [1946] 352).

Because Wild fails to read Plato in this way, he misunderstands what is in some ways the clearest illustration of the tension between philosophy and society: the allegory of the cave.⁵³ Wild assumes that the image is explicable in light of the discussion of the divided line that precedes it; that is, he fails to consider that, if the myth is included, and if every part of a good writing is necessary, the allegory must in some sense contribute to the argument rather than merely illustrate what had come before. As a result, Wild fails to see, for example, that “the cave represents the city” (Strauss [1946] 354) and the attendant way in which the political community is thus identified as the source of the opinions or conventions that are both the obstacle and the spur to the ascent to nature or the truth that is animating principle of philosophy as a way of life. In his haste to vindicate Plato, Wild fails not only to understand Plato but even to read him in the only manner in which such an understanding would even be possible.

4 Conclusion

We have now seen several ways in which both modern prejudices and an overhasty desire to vindicate and to make use of the ancients can vitiate any attempt to recover classical thought on its own terms. Strauss’ criticisms of historicism are fairly well known, but his critique of the overhasty preference for the ancients is probably much less known, especially since Strauss generally does not hesitate to encourage the suspicion that the ancients are

52 Reflection on this passage clarifies Strauss’ rather obscure discussion of interpreting and criticizing Plato at Strauss (1952) 583–84.

53 *Republic* 514a–521b, discussed by Strauss at Strauss (1946) 353–55.

decisively superior to the moderns.⁵⁴ As Strauss makes clear in his review of Collingwood's *Idea of History*, it is perfectly legitimate and even unavoidable that a turn to the ancients will be motivated by a concern with modern or contemporary problems that are, as such, foreign to the concerns that motivated the ancient authors to which one turns. Our reasons for turning to them are not identical to their reasons for writing (Strauss [1952] 580–81). Yet Strauss also stresses that, once we have decided to attempt to recover classical thought, once we have seen the clear need to do so and thus have acquired the "philosophic incentive" necessary for understanding them, we must immediately subordinate ourselves entirely to the authors to which we turn. There is no other way to understand them as they understood themselves. We must attempt to suspend all prejudices we may detect in ourselves (especially modern prejudices); we must, in fact, admit our ignorance: we do not know what the classical authors thought, nor do we know, prior to immersing ourselves in their writings, how we are to go about reading them in order to discover that thought (Strauss [1952] 583–85; Strauss [1946] 331). We must attempt to discover and follow the "directives" or "signposts" which they supply for understanding them (Strauss [1952] 583; Strauss [1946] 331). We must suspend our own questions in order to discover what questions the classics posed, and we must be open to the possibility that our own questions ought to be discarded in favor of those asked by the ancients (Strauss [1952] 582–83). Both Wild and Collingwood, for various reasons, underestimated the extent and difficulty of the task implied in the attempt to understand the ancients exactly as they understood themselves.

Strauss does not underestimate the task—the disorientation or the profound intellectual transformation that it might cause in anyone who undertakes it.⁵⁵ But nothing short of such an attempt will allow for an adequate recovery of ancient thought and a free and impartial resumption of the quarrel between ancients and moderns. Regardless of the defects Strauss finds in modern philosophy, these defects do not simply vindicate the ancients. The return to the ancients is "tentative or experimental" (Strauss [1964] 11), and the outcome is unclear. As Strauss remarks in a passage that is strangely presented nearly verbatim in both reviews,

When [a historian of thought] engages in the study of classical philosophy he must know that he embarks on a journey whose end is completely

54 See Strauss (1953) vii and Strauss (1975) 98.

55 Nor does he underestimate the extent to which the successes of modern science render any recovery of classical thought problematic; see Strauss (1953) 7–8 and Strauss (1946) 339.

hidden from him. He is not likely to return to the shores of our time as exactly the same man who departed from them. (Strauss [1946] 331; see Strauss [1952] 583)

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PART 3

Aristophanes



Learning to Love Aristophanes: Reading Aristophanes with Strauss

Christopher Baldwin

According to legend, Plato slept with a copy of Aristophanes under his pillow. We might well wonder how anyone could ever have found it plausible to record that Plato, that serious philosopher and defender of Socrates, read and enjoyed Aristophanes, that ridiculous comic poet and critic of Socrates. Or could it be that there is more to Aristophanes than first meets the eye? Leo Strauss certainly suggests so. In a series of lectures delivered at the University of Chicago in 1958 (“The Problem of Socrates”), Strauss argues that Aristophanes was no mere comic poet and no mere critic of Socrates.¹ Strauss argues that while Aristophanes’ plays certainly reveal to us his great comic genius, they also more subtly reveal to us his even greater wisdom—a wisdom that poses a serious and thoughtful challenge to the wisdom offered by Xenophon and Plato’s Socrates and that is thus worthy of our serious and sympathetic consideration. Simultaneously sublimely ridiculous and deeply serious, Aristophanes’ plays, Strauss suggests, are well worth any effort it might take to come “to understand, to appreciate, and to love” them; and it is just such a labor of love that Strauss invites us to undertake with the 1966 publication of *Socrates and Aristophanes*, his comprehensive and richly challenging study of Aristophanes.²

In *Socrates and Aristophanes*, Strauss invites us to read and ponder Aristophanes along with him as he guides us through each of Aristophanes’ extant plays, encouraging and challenging us to consider every aspect of those plays with the same serious attention and loving care he obviously has. To be sure, many things about Strauss’ study of Aristophanes might well puzzle us, as many a perplexed reader of *Socrates and Aristophanes* could attest.

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- 1 This lecture series has been published in its entirety in Strauss 1996. The lectures had been published by Thomas L. Pangle in a more heavily edited and corrected form in Strauss 1989. All subsequent references to this lecture series will be to Pangle’s edited and corrected version of 1989.
 - 2 Strauss 1989, 107. On the importance Strauss attached to (and the delight he took in) his study of Aristophanes, consider his letters to Alexandre Kojève of 29 May 1962 and 3 June 1965 as reprinted in Strauss 1991, 309 and 314.

I would suggest, however, that such is Strauss' intent. As I here hope to show, Strauss' goal in *Socrates and Aristophanes* is not to explain away all the puzzles posed to us by Aristophanes' plays, but rather to help us come to see and think through those puzzles for ourselves. If we accept Strauss' invitation to read Aristophanes along with him, puzzling over Aristophanes' plays with help of his own thought-provoking and sometimes puzzling readings of those plays, Strauss helps us learn to love Aristophanes by helping us come to see and appreciate for ourselves the wisdom he offers us.³

1 Aristophanes and Socrates: Friend or Foe?

In reading Aristophanes along with Strauss in *Socrates and Aristophanes*, the very first question Strauss asks us to consider is that of the relationship between Socrates and Aristophanes. The title of the book itself prompts us to wonder about the relationship between Socrates and Aristophanes, as does the fact that Strauss invites us first to read and reflect on the *Clouds* before turning to a consideration of Aristophanes' other plays in the order in which they were originally produced. Following Strauss' lead by reading the *Clouds*, we might initially think that the relationship between Socrates and Aristophanes is one of enmity. After all, Aristophanes presents Socrates as a teacher of impiety and injustice. Apparently on the basis of some rather strange arguments drawn from natural philosophy, Socrates denies the existence of Zeus and the other gods of the city, and he teaches Pheidippides to do the same. What is more, by presenting Pheidippides with the defeat of the Just Speech, Socrates seems to be a teacher of injustice—teaching Pheidippides that he might violate without compunction not only the laws governing the city (by defrauding his creditors), but also the laws governing the family (by beating his own father—and contemplating still worse crimes against the family!). In the end, however, we see the gods themselves, through the actions of Strepsiades, punish Socrates for his impiety and injustice by burning down his home and school, the Thinkery. Since Aristophanes presents the defeat of Socrates, we might understandably enough conclude, like many other readers of the *Clouds*, that Aristophanes himself was an enemy of the sophistic Socrates and a defender of old-fashioned family values, justice, and piety. Strauss, however, provocatively asks us to question this conclusion.

3 My own understanding of Aristophanes and of Strauss' understanding of Aristophanes has benefited greatly from Ambler and Pangle 2013; Burns 2012; Burns 2013; Burns 2014; and Stauffer 2014.

Strauss notes that even if we conclude that Aristophanes approved of Socrates' defeat in the *Clouds*, we might still wonder on what grounds Aristophanes did so. Did Aristophanes think Socrates deserved defeat "on account of his opinions" or only because of his "ways"—for example, his way of imprudently blurting out his opinion that Zeus does not exist (11)?⁴ Could Aristophanes and his Socrates be closer in their "opinions" if not their "ways" than might initially seem to be the case? Toward the end of his discussion of the *Clouds*, Strauss asks us to consider just such a possibility. He raises the possibility that Aristophanes criticized Socrates less for what he thought than for the impolitic and imprudent way in which he communicated it. Could Aristophanes have largely, but not entirely, agreed with his Socrates regarding justice and the gods, but simply expressed his thought in a more politic and prudent way? To answer this question, Strauss suggests that we turn to Aristophanes' other plays while calling our attention to ten subjects "linked" to this question: "family and city, pleasure and justice, nature and convention, the ancient and the novel, the Muses, and father-beating" (53). Strauss thereby (somewhat enigmatically) lays out a roadmap for us as we continue to read Aristophanes' plays along with him. If we keep in mind and seek to understand Aristophanes' thoughts on these ten subjects as we read along with Strauss Aristophanes' other plays, which also happen to be ten in number, our understanding of Aristophanes will gradually deepen; we will gradually gather the evidence we need to understand his thought.

2 The Problem of Justice

Following Strauss' lead, we turn from the *Clouds* to the *Acharnians*, the first of Aristophanes' extant plays where he publicly presents himself as a teacher of justice: he claims that he dares to say just things to the often unjust Athenians—to speak truth to power—come what may. Yet what Aristophanes says about himself seems to be undermined by what he *does* in the *Acharnians*: celebrate treason! Lamenting Athens' war with Sparta, Dikaiopolis, who comically depicts Aristophanes himself, longs to return to the life of peace and pleasure he once enjoyed in the country with his family before the war. Since Athens in its present corrupt state will not seek peace, Dikaiopolis completely disregards the city and his duty to it to make a purely private peace for his family and himself with the city's bitter enemy, Sparta, a treasonous deed in which he is (after many comical twists and turns) entirely successful. Dikaiopolis

4 Strauss 1966. All references to *Socrates and Aristophanes* will be cited parenthetically.

then proceeds to make use of his treasonously secured peace to enjoy a perfectly self-sufficient and happy life filled with private pleasures. The play ends with Dikaiopolis happily enjoying his peace and a good meal followed by an evening of drinking and love-making, while his fellow citizens continue to go off to war to fight and die. How, we cannot help but wonder, can Aristophanes both present himself as a teacher of justice and celebrate the victory of—even identify himself with—such a man as Dikaiopolis?

Could it be, as Strauss prompts us to ask, that Dikaiopolis is not so unjust as he might initially seem to be? After all, we learn in the play that peace is favored by the gods, and thus apparently just. And is not peace “best for the city as a whole,” and thus again a just cause? Is it not the city in its current corrupt state, led by the war-mongering Kleon, that is unjust by continuing to prefer war to peace? In such circumstances, when one’s city itself is in the wrong, is it not just to act against one’s city? Must one not sometimes act “against the will of the city” for “the good of the city” (59)? And if one’s city will not reform itself and do the right thing, is it wrong to try to do the right thing oneself, to create as just and good a life for one’s family and oneself as possible? Is there not, then, considerable justice in Dikaiopolis’ desire to secure, as best he can under current conditions, a peaceful and good life for his family and himself? It is, then, possible to understand how Aristophanes might both present himself as a teacher of justice and celebrate the victory of Dikaiopolis, for Dikaiopolis is perhaps not so unjust as he might initially seem to be. Indeed, by showing his fellow citizens the pleasures of peace and pointing to the pain and suffering of war, Aristophanes provokes them to desire the pleasures of peace for themselves. He leads them to prefer peace to war. That is to say, he teaches them to be more just. Aristophanes is indeed a teacher of justice.

As a teacher of justice, though, Aristophanes seems to point not only to the justice of peace, but also to a certain problem with justice. In the *Acharnians*, Dikaiopolis cannot pursue the just end of peace except by the use of unjust means, such as treason. Perfect justice is impossible. What is more, beneath the play’s comic surface, Dikaiopolis faces a tragic dilemma. The demands of the city and the family—the first two of the ten important subjects Strauss has brought to our attention—are in tension with one another. Being a good citizen and a good father and husband both seem to be just. Yet Dikaiopolis simply cannot simultaneously be both a good citizen, fighting and perhaps dying for the city in war, and a good father and husband, staying home to provide a peaceful and good life for his family. Tragically, he must choose between being a good citizen and a good father and husband. Once again, perfect justice is impossible. Or could it be that it is only in Athens’ current corrupt state that consistent justice is impossible and one must tragically choose between one’s

city and one's family? If Athens were to reform itself, might it not be possible to avoid such a tragic choice, to reconcile the demands of the city and the family? With this question in mind, we turn to the *Knights*, where Aristophanes muses on the prospects for political reform in Athens.

In the *Knights* Aristophanes imagines the end of Athens' current corruption and the establishment of a kind of best or ideal regime. Kleon is overthrown, peace is secured, the *demos* is restored to its former glory and returns to the country to live a simple life of private pleasure while all the burdens of political life are borne by a perfectly benevolent ruler, a lowly born but highly talented sausage seller. Like all utopias, however, Aristophanes' comic utopia is more than a little reminiscent of a "fairy tale," a beautiful fiction presenting us with "the fulfillment of a perfectly just wish" that is unfortunately "impossible" and never to be known in fact (109). For the *Knights* reveals the justice of radical political reform by clearly, albeit comically, revealing the utter corruption of Athenian political life. Kleon is obviously corrupt and deserves to be overthrown. He is a demagogue who "flatters and bribes" the city more "cleverly and successfully" than anyone else, and he does so "with exclusive regard to his own benefit" (81). He even sinks so low as to exploit the piety of the *demos* by interpreting oracles in a way that allows him to manipulate the *demos* and serve his own purposes. But who will replace Kleon? Perhaps decent gentlemen like Nicias, Demosthenes, and the chorus of knights? Yet Strauss shows how Aristophanes leads us to doubt whether they are truly as decent and gentlemanly as they claim and believe themselves to be. After all, they are just as willing as Kleon to make use of low and demagogic means to acquire power, including "exploiting the belief[s]" of their fellow citizens (82). Not only, though, do the gentlemen openly embrace the use of "impudence, vulgarity, and crookedness," they themselves sometimes fail "to show [even] a trace of the moderation" that is "the very basis of their . . . claim to public respectability." That is to say, the gentlemen overestimate their "breeding and moderation" and are not nearly so gentlemanly as they believe themselves to be (86). Would their rule really be all that much better than Kleon's?

The only realistic prospect for genuine political reform in Athens seems to lie in an unrealistic hope: the emergence of the perfect ruler in the form of a lowly sausage seller. But how could a sausage seller, even if he would be a perfect ruler, possibly rise to power? Indeed, how could the perfect ruler, a good man, rise to power at all in Athens, sausage seller or not? For Athenian political life is a moral cesspool: only by playing dirty can you rise to the top. As Strauss puts it, Aristophanes suggests that "leading the *demos* . . . requires ignorance and rascality" (84). As a result, the perfect ruler would have to be a "demagogue still lower and meaner than Kleon who can out-Kleon him" (85).

He would have to surpass the demagogic Kleon in his mastery of the low arts of politics, but use those low arts (and his other great skills) only for a high and selfless purpose, serving the people. That is to say, he would have to be utterly Machiavellian in his abilities, but utterly un-Machiavellian in his character. Could such a person even exist? What is more, even if such a person could exist, and even if he could somehow come to power, could even such a person reform Athens and rule it well?

Over the course of the *Knights*, we come to realize that the corruption of Athens ultimately stems not from Athens' rulers or would-be rulers but from the true "master" of the city, the people—personified in the play as Demos (81). After all, Athens has corrupt leaders like Kleon because Demos chose them, and he did so as a result of his own great failings and corruption. For Demos reveals himself to lack the wisdom and virtue needed to choose good leaders (his slaves), let alone take care of the affairs of the city himself. For Athens to be reformed, its true master, the *demos*, must also be reformed. The *demos* must abandon its present vicious ways and return to its past virtue. It must be rejuvenated. In the play this is accomplished in a fabulous and unbelievable way when the sausage seller boils Demos in a way that miraculously rejuvenates him and restores him to his former rustic, simpler self. But, in reality, how is it possible to reform and rejuvenate a corrupt people? Is it even possible?

Reflection on Aristophanes' comic utopia in the *Knights* reveals both how "perfectly just" and utterly implausible, even "impossible," its realization would be, which is perhaps Aristophanes' serious point. A radical transformation of the reality of political life in Athens is something, Aristophanes suggests, "more ardently to be wished than seriously to be expected."⁵ As a result, we cannot expect an end to political corruption, the impossibility of perfect justice, or the tension that exists between the demands of the city and the demands of family. What, then, are we to do when the demands of the city and the family come into conflict? Aristophanes seems to suggest that we side with the family. For Aristophanes, as Strauss helps us see, comically points to the radical limits of and problems with political life.

Politics, Aristophanes suggests, is likely always to be plagued by some degree of corruption. In fact, in the *Knights*, not only do the corrupt leaders of the city, like Kleon, seek to benefit themselves at the expense of others, so too do the people; for as we see in the play, the *demos*, the true master of the city, is much more interested in having its interests served, particularly its perhaps low but "natural" bodily needs, than in selflessly serving others and the city (94 with 99–101). Why, Aristophanes prompts us to wonder, selflessly serve a

5 Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1961, 33.

city that is, in both its leaders and its people, so selfishly self-serving? To be sure, we might feel a powerful attachment to the city, especially to its people. After all, we are one of “the people.” Or are we? In the *Knights* Aristophanes represents the *demos* as Demos, as a person, a whole. But might that not also be one of Aristophanes’ jokes? For, as Aristophanes’ plays help us see, the city and its people are anything but a whole. Far from being a unified whole, the city is composed of competing parts: Kleon and his supporters; the gentlemen or knights; and the people, which is itself also divided, with some supporting and some opposing the war. Why not, like Dikaiopolis, leave behind the corrupt, self-serving, divisive and contentious life of the city to live “the retired and easy life of the household” with one’s family?⁶ After all, we are much more naturally a part our own family than of the city; and we are attached to it by a much stronger and more natural tie than politics, love. Or is it that simple?

Aristophanes clearly seems to point away from the city and toward the family. But even though Aristophanes suggests that family life is much more natural and fulfilling than political life, he also leads us to wonder if it is simply natural and fulfilling. For example, in the *Clouds*, Aristophanes shows us both how natural it is for fathers and sons to love one another and how natural it is for them to quarrel and fight, which they did long before either met Socrates; and in the *Acharnians* Aristophanes shows us not only the appeal of retiring to the country to live with our family, but also the appeal of leaving our family behind. For we must acknowledge that in the *Acharnians*, Dikaiopolis ultimately abandons not only the city, but also his family, even if only for a night, to carouse and sleep with beautiful young women who are not his wife. We are naturally a part of the family, Aristophanes seems to suggest, but not simply so. We are also by nature individuals concerned with our own good and our own pleasures.

Aristophanes, Strauss helps us see, leads us away from the corruption of the city and toward the enjoyment of the pleasures of family life by celebrating those like Dikaiopolis and the *demos* in the *Knights* who leave political life behind to return to the more “natural” life of “the household” (110). Strauss also helps us see, though, that Aristophanes “does not stop at the sacredness or naturalness of the family.”⁷ For Aristophanes ultimately points beyond the pleasures of family life by celebrating the victory of Dikaiopolis who leaves his family behind to enjoy still greater and more natural pleasures of a purely private or personal nature at the end of the *Acharnians*. The pleasures enjoyed by Dikaiopolis—to say nothing of Aristophanes’ open and honest celebration

6 Strauss 1989, 112.

7 Strauss 1989, 115.

of sensuality in his plays in general—suggest that Aristophanes thought that the good life will know its fair share of bodily pleasure: good food, good wine, and the pleasures of love. As Strauss points out, though, the thoughtfulness of Aristophanes' plays suggests that those pleasures must also be interpreted as “the comical equivalent[s]” of the sort of non-bodily pleasures at the heart of the good life as Aristophanes himself lived it: the pleasures of understanding—a feast of the mind, as it were—and the more social pleasures he enjoyed as a great comic poet (77 with 108). As we continue to read Aristophanes along with Strauss, however, we come to see that enjoying such a life is easier said than done. More than a few obstacles stand in our way, as we begin to see in the *Wasps*.

In the *Wasps* we meet Philokleon who suffers from a very strange disease. He is in love with judging and condemning people as a jurymen. Philokleon, though, is no ordinary jurymen. For we learn that most ordinary Athenian jurymen, represented by the chorus of wasps, serve on juries not so much out of a love of wasphishly stinging—that is to say, judging and condemning—guilty defendants as out of a love of the pay they receive, which they need to support themselves and their families. Their concern with seeing justice done grows out of a private concern, a concern that the rich Philokleon does not share. He is simply obsessed with pitilessly judging and condemning others, an obsession that stands in the way of his enjoying the sort of private pleasures the ordinary jurymen seek and that his son Bdelykleon would like him to enjoy. All Philokleon wants to do is judge and condemn, to harm others. Bdelykleon, though, wants to cure his angry and pitiless father of his extreme and misanthropic desire to judge and condemn others so that his father might enjoy a life of private pleasure. He wants to make his father gentler and happier. He is, however, only partially successful.

Philokleon is cured entirely of his desire to judge and condemn others as a jurymen and comes to enjoy a much happier life, but he is not made any gentler. Like Dikaiopolis, Philokleon comes to enjoy the pleasures of life: an evening filled with eating, drinking, and the prospect of amorous adventure. Yet unlike Dikaiopolis, who has compassion for a lovesick bride, Philokleon has no compassion for anyone; he even continues to take pleasure in harming people, although no longer as a jurymen. Freed of his desire to harm people justly as a jurymen, Philokleon now desires to harm people unjustly, both insulting and assaulting them as a private person. Either because harming people has become an “ingrained habit” over the years or simply because “he is by nature malicious,” Philokleon retains his waspish desire to sting (119, 131).

Aristophanes suggests that the waspish desire to harm, at least in the form of a “natural inclination to malice and mischief,” is an inevitable fact of life (134).

The question is how to deal with that fact. The desire to harm can either be lawfully directed, by fighting for the city in war and serving on juries and such, or lawlessly directed against one's own fellow citizens. Taken to an extreme, both possibilities are problematic. At the beginning of the *Wasps*, Philokleon's extreme but lawful waspishness—his excessive concern with meting out punitive justice—was good neither for his fellow citizens nor for himself. He was excessively harsh toward both his fellow citizens and toward himself. What is more, his extreme concern with meting out punitive justice stood in the way of his enjoying the pleasures of life. It is obviously good, Aristophanes suggests, for Philokleon to be liberated from such extremism. But is it good for him to go to the other extreme, to be liberated from all concern with justice and lawfulness? It is clearly not good for Philokleon's fellow citizens and his son, who now suffer from his lawless waspishness and desire to harm.

In the *Wasps*, Philokleon gets away with and delights in his lawless enjoyment of pleasure, mischief, and malice. But how long before his desire to sting his fellow citizens provokes them to sting him back? Mustn't he learn some respect for justice, even if simply for his own good? By presenting both Philokleon's extreme devotion to punitive justice and his extreme liberation from all concern for justice as laughable, Aristophanes liberates us from the folly of both extremes. He liberates us from so extreme or fanatical a devotion to justice that we cannot enjoy the pleasures of life but not from all concern for justice.

Once again, then, Aristophanes reveals himself to be a teacher of justice who also points to certain problems with justice: an extreme or fanatical devotion to justice stands in the way of our enjoying the pleasures of life. Yet if we are to be liberated from such extremism so we might enjoy the pleasures of life, as Aristophanes suggests we should, a significant obstacle stands in our way: the gods.

3 The Problem of the Gods

In the *Wasps*, we learn not only about Philokleon's strange disease, but also about its cause. In the *Wasps* we learn that Philokleon was *not* fanatically devoted to judging and condemning others as a juryman because he loved the city and wanted to serve it, or because he was concerned with "upholding his dignity" as a just man, or even because he loved wielding the godlike power to condemn; rather, his conscientious devotion to condemning the injustice of others was rooted in "his fear of the gods' wrath about compassion" (119, 125). The gods, he believed, uphold the laws of the city and justice and therefore demand the punishment of those accused of injustice. As a result, he thought

that the gods would surely punish him if he showed any compassion for those accused of injustice—whether man or dog! So he judged and punished others, lest he be judged and punished himself. Consequently, it was not until he was freed of his fear of the gods that he was able to be freed of his fanatical devotion to judging and condemning other and begin to enjoy life. The gods themselves, Aristophanes thus suggests, stand in the way of our living well and enjoying life, as we also see in the *Peace*.

In the *Peace* we see Trygaios, a “thinly disguised” version of Aristophanes, openly and successfully rebels against Zeus because Zeus stands in the way of our enjoying peace and the good life (139). At the start of the play Trygaios rails against Zeus because he allows Athens’ terrible war with Sparta to continue, although he is sure Zeus does so unwittingly. Zeus does not, however, respond in any way to Trygaios’ prayers and protests, so Trygaios decides to confront Zeus in person. But how can he, a mere human, do so? Initially, he attempts to climb directly to the gods by means of ladders he has constructed, but his attempts to confront the gods so directly prove a failure. So he finds a new way to approach the gods. He uses low means to reach his high end. He rides on the back of a dung beetle to reach the heavens! That a dung beetle, attracted to the foulest of foul things, should take Trygaios directly to the gods seems to foreshadow what Trygaios comes to discover about the gods. The gods, he learns, are less fair and more foul than he supposed. Zeus and the other gods, he discovers, have not unwittingly allowed the war to continue; they consciously chose to allow it to continue, even giving free reign to Polemos (War) to destroy the Greeks and bury Eirene (Peace). Learning that Zeus and the other gods are not the just and beneficent beings he thought, Trygaios loses his fear of them and plots a rebellion against Zeus, a rebellion in which he is entirely successful. Without any hint of Zeus being genuinely able to resist or punish Trygaios’ rebellion, Trygaios succeeds in disinterring Eirene and bringing peace to the Greeks; he then retires to the country to live a life of peace, ease, and pleasure with his beautiful new wife, the goddess Opora. He will live happily ever after, or at least until war again inevitably returns.

By presenting and celebrating Trygaios’ open and successful rebellion against Zeus, Aristophanes seems to suggest that such rebellion is both desirable and possible. But how could it be possible if Zeus exists? For then Zeus would surely notice and punish such rebellion. Could it be, then, that Aristophanes agrees with his Socrates in thinking that Zeus does not exist? Without appealing to the sort of arguments drawn from natural philosophy on which his Socrates seems to rely, Aristophanes does give us reason to question Zeus’ existence in the *Peace*. Appealing only to the human experience of

the gods, Aristophanes seems to suggest that while we might, like Trygaios, sense the existence of the gods, we also have reason to doubt the gods' existence. After all, unlike Trygaios, most of us never directly see or hear the gods; they are not so much seen and heard from as "spoken about" (154). When our prayers go unanswered, as Trygaios' prayers were, we might well wonder if the gods truly exist. What is more, when the gods do speak to us, they do so indirectly; they speak to us through someone else, just as Eirene speaks to the Greeks only through Hermes. We have no proof, though, that the gods speak to us through such messengers, only the messenger's word. Can we trust the word of those messengers: prophets, priests, and the interpreters of oracles (like the unscrupulous Cleon)? Or could it be that the gods do not exist and are, like Eirene, statues—that is to say, human creations? Could it be that Phidias and other artisans, like the poets, are makers not only of "statues [and images] of the gods" but "of [the] gods" themselves (158)?

That Aristophanes questioned and doubted the existence of the gods seems to be confirmed by the *Birds*, where Aristophanes presents an even more radical rebellion against the gods than that effected by Trygaios, a "complete and permanent change in the government of the world" (170). In the *Birds* we watch as Peisthetairos and Euelpides seek to escape from the laws and other conventions of Athens to live a more natural life of ease and pleasure. After they (or maybe just Euelpides) are briefly tempted by the possibility of living an apolitical life of ease and pleasure with the birds, they (but especially Peisthetairos) conclude that they should form an alliance with the birds to found a universal city of all men and to overthrow the gods. Given the hostility of nature, suggested by the initial hostilities between the birds and Euelpides and Peisthetairos, Peisthetairos appears to reach the reasonable conclusion that we must band together in cities if we are to protect ourselves from a hostile world and live a life of ease and pleasure. But so that the cities do not fall into conflict with one another, Peisthetairos makes a bold and innovative suggestion: the city must become universal. Even more bold and innovative, though, is Peisthetairos' suggestion that Zeus and the other gods be overthrown. For, as Peisthetairos explains to the birds, the gods are not well-disposed to either man or bird. They stand in the way of our flourishing and enjoying lives of ease and pleasure in the universal city. Thus, Zeus and the other gods must be overthrown. What is more, as the cunning and courageous Peisthetairos explains to the birds, there is no good that the gods provide—or are thought to provide—that cannot be better provided for by the birds, or perhaps by nature more generally. Consequently, in rebelling against the gods, we have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Aristophanes, Strauss helps us see, seems to suggest that if we have the cunning and courage to face our situation soberly, like Trygaios and Peisthetairos, we can provide for ourselves, more or less perfectly, the goods for which we most long. If we, like Trygaios, soberly face the inevitability and terrors of war instead of trusting in the gods to save us, we can provide ourselves the peace we long for, even if that peace is impermanent. Likewise, if we, like Peisthetairos, cease to fear and rely on the gods, we can provide for ourselves other goods for which we naturally long: wealth, more or less reliable knowledge of what the future holds, health, and long life (169).⁸ We have, Aristophanes indicates, every reason to want to rebel against the gods. Belief in the gods leads us to sacrifice and deny ourselves good things in life out of fear of being punished by “repulsive and misanthropic gods” like Zeus. What is more, even belief in “beautiful and philanthropic” gods like Eirene leads us to live less good lives by leading us to believe in and rely upon gods who will “beautify life” by “changing the natures of things” rather than soberly facing and dealing as best we can with the world as it in fact is by nature (150, 155). Not only, though, does Aristophanes suggest that we should *want* to rebel against the gods; he also suggests that we *can* successfully rebel against the gods, thus implying that the gods do not truly exist.

The gods, Aristophanes suggests, are but a convention of the city from which we should and can liberate ourselves so that we might live a better and more natural life. At their deepest level, as Strauss puts it, Aristophanes’ plays “celebrate the victory of nature . . . over convention” and are thus “not opposed to philosophy simply” (173).⁹ As Strauss also helps us come to see, though, Aristophanes qualifies his celebration of the victory of nature over convention in at least two important respects. First, Aristophanes seems to wonder if we can be truly certain that the gods do not exist. After all, aren’t all accounts of the origins of things, like the theocosmogeny of the birds, somewhat “dark,” unclear, and uncertain (171)? But if we cannot know for certain the origins of all things, can we be certain that the gods do not exist, however compelling the reasons for doubting their existence might be? Accordingly, Aristophanes seems to regard both those like the soothsayer Hierokles in the *Peace*, who claims to know the gods exist, and those like his Socrates, who claims to know they do not, as boasters—that is, as claiming to know more than they in fact do (consider 17 and 156 with 143 and 312–313). Second, Aristophanes qualifies his

8 It is worth noting that Aristophanes does not suggest that we naturally long for the good things we enjoy to be ours always or for eternal life, which (if so) might make it harder to rebel against the gods than Aristophanes suggests. Cf. *Symposium* 199c3–212c3.

9 Strauss 1989, 113.

celebration of the victory of nature over convention by suggesting that human life cannot do without convention, including belief in the gods of the city.

In the *Birds*, the birds initially indicate that the city they and Peisthetairos will found will be a truly natural city, a city in which none of the conventions governing civic and family life in other cities need be observed. Over the course of the play, however, this changes: all of the conventions governing life in other cities reemerge in Peisthetairos' city. For Aristophanes suggests that the city is particularly in need of the family, the "cell" out of which the city naturally grows (313). Yet, as we have seen, Aristophanes suggests that the family, while in many ways natural, is not simply by nature. For example, the very same erotic desire that once led Dikaipolis to marry his wife and start a family with her might also very easily and naturally lead him away from his family and wife so that he might spend the night with a woman—or women!—who are not his wife. As a result, Aristophanes seems to suggest that the family, which is both by nature and naturally fragile, is in need of more than simply natural support. It needs the city and the gods of the city to uphold conventions that support and defend the family; and since the city needs the family, even the city "according to nature" turns out to be "in need of conventional things" (176), including the belief in gods who uphold the conventions and laws governing family and civic life. Thus, while Aristophanes presents "the abolition of the gods" as "desirable," he also regards belief in the gods as "a necessary evil" (192).

Recognizing that he needs the city in order to live well and that the city is "in need of conventional things," Aristophanes respects "the fundamental requirements of the city, such as a respect for those conventions that support and defend family life, like the prohibition against father-beating, and for the gods who uphold those conventions (182), as we see in the *Lysistrata*, which Strauss suggests is perhaps Aristophanes "most indecent" play in its open and ribald celebration of *eros*. For in the *Lysistrata* we watch Lysistrata lead the women of Athens in a sex strike that will last until the men come to their senses and end the destructive war between Athens and Sparta. Yet while the *Lysistrata* is Aristophanes' "most indecent" play, it is also, Strauss observes, his "most moral" play as "it does not shock justice or piety in any way" (198). In fact, the *Lysistrata* celebrates the victory of a perfectly just and pious cause or hope: the end of war so that men might return home to make love to their lawful wives and live with their families peaceful and pious lives. The simultaneously highly indecent and highly moral character of the *Lysistrata*, Strauss wryly notes, perhaps "accounts for its singular popularity" (198). For most of us, like the women of the play, perhaps delight both in being reminded of—to say nothing of actually satisfying—our most natural desires, like our erotic desires, and in the hope or belief that those desires might be fully satisfied in ways that

are simply moral and in accord with the demands of justice and piety.¹⁰ Thus, in the *Lysistrata* Aristophanes reveals that he understands and is capable of respecting “the fundamental requirements of the city without looking at them as the city looks at them” (312); and he also reveals a deep and sympathetic understanding of the longings, hopes, and beliefs of most members of his audience, even as he quietly calls those hopes and beliefs into question.

4 Aristophanes' Poetic Politics

Understanding “the fundamental requirements of the city” and the souls of their fellow human beings, Aristophanes suggests that poets like himself are able to find or forge a place for themselves in the city. In the *Birds*, for example, Aristophanes indicates that poets, just as philosophers like Meton and Socrates, think “lofty” thoughts that call into question the gods and other conventions of the city (183). Unlike Meton, though, poets find a place in Peisthetairoi's city; “the city according to nature,” Aristophanes indicates, “is compatible with poetry and even calls for poetry” (186). For the poets possess powers that philosophers lack, the power both to reveal and obscure the truth about the conflict between convention and nature and the power to shape public opinion. As a result, poets can find a place in the city by obscuring the conflict between the good life by nature and the demands of civic life and by supporting the city by crafting stories about gods who uphold and defend the conventions and laws of the city. Not only, though, do wise poets, unlike philosophers, have the ability to find a place, even if an uneasy place, for themselves in the city by helping it; they also have the ability, again unlike philosophers, to protect themselves against the city if the city, or a part of the city, turns against them, as Strauss brings out in his discussion of the *Thesmophoriazusai*.

In the *Thesmophoriazusai* we learn that Euripides is hated and soon to be persecuted by the women of Athens because of the terrible, but true, things he says about them. Now Aristophanes, as Strauss helps us see, does not mean to suggest that Euripides was truly hated by the women of Athens. Rather, Strauss suggests that Aristophanes divides the world into two types of men, “womanly” men and “manly” men, and that the women of Athens are meant to poetically represent those “womanly” men of Athens who hated and wanted

10 Cf. Montesquieu 1989, 25.2: “Men, rascals when taken one by one, are very honest as a whole; they love morality; and if I were not considering such a serious subject, I would say that it is remarkably clear in the theaters: one is sure to please people by the feelings that morality professes, and one is sure to offend them by those that it disapproves.”

to persecute Euripides (234). Who exactly are these “womanly” men? Strauss suggests that the *Lysistrata*, which also depicts the women of Athens, indicates that they are those men most concerned with goods like love, family, and peace and their lawful enjoyment; and the *Thesmophoriazusai*, Strauss observes, suggests that these men are also noteworthy for their piety.

According to Aristophanes, then, “womanly” men—and Aristophanes seems to regard most men as “womanly”—are deeply concerned with beautiful but fragile goods like love, family, and peace. The fragility of these goods, though, seems to lead these men to hope for and believe in laws and gods that support and protect these goods. Now these men might be especially inclined to believe in “beautiful and philanthropic gods” who simply support and protect the goods they most care about, goddesses like Eirene and Aphrodite. Yet they are also inevitably led to believe in more “repulsive and misanthropic gods” who will punish those who transgress the laws supporting the goods they most cherish, goddesses and gods like Artemis, Athena, Hera, and Zeus (150 with 210–212). A select few, though, Aristophanes suggests, will be cunning and courageous (or “manly” enough) to question the beliefs of “womanly” men—that is to say, of most men. These “manly” types will “deny . . . that there are gods” and conclude that “the gods are . . . [only] by *nomos*” or convention (234).

Now in the *Thesmophoriazusai* we learn that Euripides is one of these “manly” types. Associated with novel arguments made by philosophers like Socrates, Euripides is suspected of impiety and therefore at risk of being persecuted by the more “womanly” types of men in the city. Unlike philosophers like Socrates, however, Euripides proves able to avoid persecution and come to terms with those who would persecute him. For Euripides does not simply deny the existence of the gods; he also possesses considerable “knowledge of the ways of women” such that he understands that, while untrue, belief in the gods is “required for the sake of women or produced by the virtue of women.” That is to say, he realizes that neither the city nor most of his fellow citizens can do without belief in the gods. As a consequence, he makes a “concession” to his would-be persecutors and chooses to “defer, within reason, to the sentiments of the ‘womanly’ kind” of men by publicly affirming the existence of the ancestral gods of the city, even while quietly but powerfully calling into question those gods and the human experience of justice and piety (232–234). What is more, Aristophanes indicates that Euripides was able to use his knowledge of the ways of his would-be persecutors to protect himself against them by threatening to reveal unflattering truths about them that they would rather conceal. Aristophanes thus suggests that the poets’ ability to speak to and shape public opinion, which allows them to help the city and their friends and to harm their enemies, makes the poets a political presence in the city and

gives them the power to find or forge a place for themselves in the city, a power that the *Frogs* suggests comic poets like himself are especially well-equipped to wield.

In the *Frogs* we learn that Dionysus, who seems to represent or speak for Aristophanes, laments the sorry state of tragic poetry in Athens now that Euripides, who he especially admires and loves, is dead. Since none of the remaining tragic poets in Athens even come close to rivaling the greatness of Euripides in Dionysus' view, Dionysus decides to descend into Hades to steal Euripides away, intending to bring him back to life to revitalize tragic poetry in Athens. Through a series of ridiculous and hilarious twists and turns, Dionysus finds himself judging a contest between Aeschylus and Euripides to determine who is the greatest poet, with the winner to return to Athens with Dionysus. Yet despite his deep personal fondness for Euripides and seeming preference for his skill and wisdom as a poet, Dionysus chooses Aeschylus over Euripides. He does so, however, not on the grounds of Aeschylus' superior poetic excellence, but only on the grounds of his superior political wisdom. Dionysus seems to conclude that the city is better served, as Aeschylus argues, by the edifying poetry of poets like himself who teach men to be citizen-warriors like those who once fought at Marathon: men possessed of "warlike patriotism and stern self-control" who "worship . . . the ancestral gods" (254). Accordingly, Dionysus chooses the old-fashioned and traditional Aeschylus over the novel and sophisticated Euripides so that he might return to Athens and revitalize the city, without which poets and their poetry could not exist and flourish.

Now upon reflection, as Strauss helps us see, the *Frogs* might well leave us wondering if the truly greatest poet is neither Aeschylus nor Euripides, but rather Aristophanes himself. After all, what Aristophanes' other plays repeatedly demonstrate, the *Frogs* again confirms: as a comic poet Aristophanes is a genius without equal. In the *Frogs*, though, Aristophanes reveals not only that he is a master of the art of comedy but also that he possesses a deep understanding of tragedy, particularly of the serious subjects explored by tragic poets like Aeschylus and Euripides. What is more, Aristophanes suggests that comic poets like himself are no less able—and perhaps even better able—than tragic poets to explore those subjects in a serious and politically responsible manner. For over the course of the *Frogs* Aristophanes raises and explores a number of serious subjects—from death and the afterlife to the gods to the possibility (or impossibility) of divine justice. In doing so, Aristophanes reveals his wisdom, a wisdom that rivals—perhaps even exceeds—that offered by tragic poets like Aeschylus and Euripides, and he does so in a politically responsible manner: in the guise of a mere comic poet. He allows his fellow citizens to think that the serious questions he raises and the suggestions he makes are only jokes

and not meant to be taken seriously, part of a comedy that is merely meant to entertain. Aristophanes even seems to affirm the wisdom of Aeschylus, whose edifying defense of the ancestral ways and gods of the city are so useful to the city. Yet Aristophanes also simultaneously pokes fun at Aeschylus, thereby moderating or correcting the potential extremism of Aeschylus' teaching. Aristophanes thus engages in a sort of politically responsible poetic politics. He uses his abilities as a poet in a way that respects and supports "the fundamental requirements of the city" while simultaneously moderating and humanizing the city (312). For while Aristophanes teaches his fellow citizens to respect the laws and gods of the city, he also teaches them to sympathize with those who would rebel against the laws of the city for human-all-too-human reasons, as we see in the *Assembly of Women*.

In the *Assembly of Women*, Strauss helps us see, we learn why rebellion against the laws of the city both is and is not desirable. For as the heroine of the *Assembly of Women*, Praxagora, makes evident, the laws of the city are clearly unjust. The laws allow the city to be ruled by men who are corrupt and incompetent. They also allow for an unequal and unjust distribution of wealth that leads to further injustices, such as beautiful and impressive young women like Praxagora marrying old and altogether unimpressive men like Blepyros simply because they are wealthy—a crime against the natural order of things that must surely have helped animate Praxagora's desire for change. Rebellion against the laws of the city thus clearly seems desirable. Since the laws are so terribly unjust, justice itself seems to call for a radical revolution: the old regime and its laws should be replaced by a new regime with new laws.

Since the men have proven such terrible rulers, Praxagora proposes that the women, who are good rulers of the household, be given a chance to rule. Henceforth, she proposes, the city will be ruled like the household. Private property and the private family, both of which might tempt us to injustice, will be abolished, and the city will become like one large family. Everyone will share and share alike, and everyone will be free to sleep with whomever they like. Now this last reform, Blepyros notes, seems unfair to the old and ugly (such as himself) as nobody will want to sleep with them. To remedy this injustice, Praxagora proposes a new law: the young and beautiful must first sleep with the old and ugly before they are free to sleep with whomever else they like.

Despite Praxagora's best intentions, we learn over the course of the play that her new regime does not bring about the end of injustice. In fact, it leads to arguably graver and uglier injustices as we see when two young lovers are torn and kept apart by three increasingly older and uglier hags who demand the services of the handsome young lover. In Praxagora's new regime "Eros does not listen to the prayers of lovers," but rather "death and decay triumph over

life and bloom" (277). By showing us the ugly and repulsive consequences of Praxagora's reforms, Aristophanes helps us see that her new regime is not better than the old regime, however serious its problems were. In fact, he seems to suggest that no revolution can bring about "the abolition of misery but [only] a redistribution of misery and happiness" (278–279). That is to say, Aristophanes suggests that the perfectly just regime is impossible and that attempts to cure present injustices, like Praxagora's, are often worse than the original disease. In this way, Aristophanes teaches his fellow citizens to prefer the ancestral laws of the city over novel innovations. He also, though, at least partially liberates his fellow citizens from an unthinking respect for the laws of the city by revealing the limits of and problems with those laws and by provoking sympathy for those like Praxagora and the two young lovers who are tempted to transgress the laws of the city because those laws frustrate their natural erotic desires. As Strauss helps us see, Aristophanes thus moderates and humanizes the city, leading his fellow citizens to be more forgiving and tolerant of our (sometimes unlawful) erotic desires.

As Strauss further helps us see, though, to succeed in humanizing the city, Aristophanes must attack the gods. For as we have learned from the *Wasps*, fear of the gods' wrath for failing to punish those accused of injustice stands in the way of showing compassion for those who would transgress the laws of the city. Thus, if Aristophanes is to succeed in partially liberating his fellow citizens from an unthinking and too stern respect for the laws of the city, he must also partially liberate them from their fear of the gods, as he does in the *Plutos*. For in the *Plutos*, as in the *Peace* and the *Birds*, Aristophanes suggests that rebellion against the ancestral gods of the city is both desirable and possible. Without denying the existence of the gods, like his Socrates, appealing to arguments drawn from natural philosophy, Aristophanes prompts his fellow citizens to laugh at the gods for their bungling ineptitude and to doubt their justice. In this way, as Strauss helps us see, Aristophanes lessens somewhat the power of the gods over his fellow citizens.

To be sure, Aristophanes allows, even encourages, his fellow citizens to regard his jokes as merely jokes and to return to the worship of the gods of the city. But still, having laughed at the gods, they perhaps can no longer take the gods quite as seriously as they once did. By beating up on the gods, as it were, Aristophanes liberates his fellow citizens, at least somewhat, from their fear of gods such that they might show compassion toward those who transgress the laws of the city, at least toward those who do so when prompted by erotic necessities. Aristophanes thus engages in a sort of poetic politics that humanizes the city and helps make room in the city for the enjoyment of our natural

erotic desires and for poets like himself who celebrate the pleasures of love and beauty.

5 Conclusion

In reading Aristophanes along with Strauss, we have barely begun to uncover the riches of Aristophanes' plays and of Strauss' study of those plays. We are, however, perhaps in a position to answer the question with which we began. Could Aristophanes have largely, but not entirely, agreed with his Socrates regarding justice and the gods, but simply expressed his thought in a more politic and prudent way? Strauss, it seems to me, suggests that the answer to our question is: Yes. Aristophanes was not an enemy of Socrates, but rather a kindred spirit who largely, but perhaps not entirely, agreed with his Socrates. For as Strauss helps us see, Aristophanes' plays, in addition to being hilarious, also reveal a considerable understanding of the problem of justice and a deep and profound understanding of the problem of the gods in a way that is politically responsible and allows Aristophanes to humanize the city and forge a place for himself in the city. In doing so, Strauss suggests, Aristophanes' comedies offers us a wisdom that surpasses that offered by the great tragedians.

Like the tragedians, Strauss suggests, Aristophanes explores the most serious questions and problems posed to us by life. Consider, for example, some of the serious questions Aristophanes' plays raise: Can we be free of the evils of war, of poverty and want, of foolish and unjust government, and even of death itself? On the surface, of course, Aristophanes' comedies suggest that we can be rid of these evils. Yet the ridiculous, fantastic, and ultimately unbelievable lengths to which Aristophanes' heroes must go to be rid of these evils points to a more sobering and tragic reality: In truth, we will never be rid of the evils of war, of poverty and want, of foolish and unjust government, and of death. Like the tragic poets, then, Aristophanes suggests that there is a tragic dimension to human life.

Unlike the tragic poets, though, Aristophanes can hardly be said to invite us to weep over our tragic fate. Instead, his comedies seem to invite us to laugh at the tragic dimension of human life and at ourselves—at our folly—for thinking that dimension of life can be overcome. And in doing so, Aristophanes' comedies do something that tragedy simply cannot do: they point beyond tragedy to a non-tragic response to the problems posed to us by human life. Aristophanes' comedies both teach us how we might soberly accept the world as it is and remind us that while human life might be tragic in many respects, it

is not simply tragic. Colloquially speaking, life might not be a bowl of cherries, but neither is it simply the pits. There might be much in life to weep over, but there is still more to laugh at, to delight in, and to celebrate, as Aristophanes' comedies help us both see and do. Thus, Strauss seems to suggest, that while great tragedy can indeed help us suffer our way to wisdom, leaving us sadder but wiser, Aristophanic comedy and the Dionysian laughter it provokes is even better able to lead us to wisdom, leaving us both gladder and wiser still than tragedy.

Aristophanes plays suggests to us, as Nietzsche would later put it, that there is "an order of rank among" the wise "depending on the rank of their laughter," with the wisest being "capable of *golden* laughter" and that Aristophanes himself was clearly wise and capable of such golden laughter.¹¹ We might well wonder, along with Strauss at the end of *Socrates and Aristophanes*, if Xenophon and Plato's Socrates was wiser still than Aristophanes. Nonetheless, it is hard not to be delighted by and grateful for Aristophanes' golden laughter and his even more golden wisdom. Consequently, it is perhaps not so far-fetched as we might have initially supposed to imagine that Plato slept with a copy of Aristophanes under his pillow. For as Strauss has helped us see, when it comes to Aristophanes, to know him is to love him.

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PART 4

Xenophon



On Leo Strauss's Presentation of Xenophon's Political Philosophy in "The Problem of Socrates"

Richard S. Ruderman

In October–November 1958, Leo Strauss presented a series of five lectures on "The Problem of Socrates."¹ The title, gratefully adopted from Nietzsche, nevertheless refers to a yet greater problem than the one to which Nietzsche pointed. According to Nietzsche, the Socratic introduction of reason as the arbiter of morals, politics, religion—indeed of life itself—marked the decline and death of what had been the most human and heroic of cultures, the old Homeric agnostic culture in which grand souls, unhampered by the nattering negativism of reason's questioning and second-guessing, could struggle with one another in an ongoing effort to meet, address, and even surpass challenges. For once Socrates, as Nietzsche puts it, challenged Achilles to explain and justify himself, the latter was reduced to a somewhat incoherent stuttering.² And perhaps worse, this Socratic victory (a victory over the very concept and goal of victory) marked a long period of weakness and decline for Western culture.

But all this would, even if true, constitute only something like "The Dastardly Error of Socrates." Socrates in fact constitutes a "problem" because his teaching is, in addition to being dangerous and wrong, an overwhelmingly powerful "fascination." It not only introduces the need to live according to the truth, it makes the most powerful case for having in fact succeeded at doing so.³ Insofar as all of Socrates' followers, whether classical, medieval or even modern (on this score, even Socrates' modern critics concede Socrates' standard), have succumbed to the (impossible, according to Nietzsche) desire to validate, justify, and demonstrate the true way of life—and then to live it.

When Strauss, in 1958, refers to the "problem" of Socrates, however, he rolls into it the criticism of one additional observer: Heidegger. It is true that Strauss

1 The lectures were first published in Strauss 1989 and then republished in a slightly altered and expanded form in Strauss 1995. Page references are to the former edition, except in the concluding discussion, where equivalent pages to the 1995 version are provided.

2 "Before Socrates, dialectic manners were repudiated in good society... [A]ll... presentations of one's reasons were distrusted" (Nietzsche 1982, 475–76).

3 Nietzsche remarks "even Socrates was tired of [life]" (Nietzsche 1982, 473).

does not mention Heidegger by name in the 1958 lectures. It is not until 1970, when Strauss again offered a lecture entitled “The Problem of Socrates,” that he explicitly discusses Heidegger and his criticisms of ancient philosophy. Strauss there argues their relevance to the issue despite the fact, as he concedes, Heidegger only once refers to Socrates in his published writings (Strauss 1995, 324). For the “problem of Socrates” means ultimately the “problem with rationalism” altogether. And, as we shall see, Strauss wished to ensure that the defense of rationalism he offered in 1958 would confront Heidegger’s criticisms as well as Nietzsche’s. Like Nietzsche, Heidegger stands with the Homeric and pre-Socratic world against the Socratic one. Yet, even in calling out Socrates for inventing the cudgels of metaphysics and values, Nietzsche (according to Heidegger) still fell under their spell.⁴ For the problem went even deeper than Nietzsche realized. Socrates—and Western philosophy as a whole—had led to a forgetfulness of Being. The problem with Socrates was not only that he was petty and vengeful—he was shallow. Moreover, in his drive to understand the world, Socrates illegitimately presupposed the commensurability of the beings, of the ultimate objects of his consideration. In order to think about “what is,” Socrates failed to let the world reveal itself as it is, in its fundamental difference. As though he were the ultra-sophisticated Prosecuting Attorney that the city of Athens never had, Heidegger proposes (via *de-Konstruktion*) to finally put Socrates to death.

In elucidating and unraveling “the problem of Socrates,” then, Strauss sought to confront and address the powerful criticisms of the very possibility of philosophy. As one seeking to rehabilitate and recover classic, Socratic rationalism, Strauss must ultimately confront these powerful accusations against Socrates and show that he could meet and refute them.

While Strauss undertakes this task throughout the five-lecture series, the central burden of his argument (toward the end of Lecture 2 and all of Lecture 3) rests on his presentation of Xenophon, that humble Socratic to whose rehabilitation Strauss had dedicated much of his intellectual life, and of whom Heidegger and Nietzsche could not deign to take the slightest notice. To defend Socrates against the charge of being shallow, then, Strauss enlists the aid of the man reputed to be the shallowest of Socratics, Xenophon. Like Machiavelli, Strauss has a taste for re-enacting—and perhaps surpassing—the victory of David over Goliath (see *Prince*, ch. 13).

4 “His entanglement in the thicket of the idea of values, his failure to understand its questionable origin, is the reason why Nietzsche did not attain to the true center of philosophy” (Heidegger 1959, 199). Cf. 36: “Was [Nietzsche] himself only the last victim of a long process of error and neglect?”

When Strauss first turned his attention to him in the 1930's, Xenophon's reputation was at perhaps its lowest ebb (Strauss 1999, 26, 129n37). Heidegger, who paid intent attention to at least certain works of Plato and Aristotle, does not to my knowledge refer a single time in his writings to Xenophon. Nor does Husserl or even Nietzsche.⁵ And the few classicists willing to take on the responsibility of carrying Xenophon's reputation forward appear to vie with one another to see who can hold him in greater contempt.⁶

Knowing, however, that men of the caliber of Montesquieu, Shaftesbury, and especially Machiavelli admired Xenophon enormously, Strauss was emboldened. Xenophon's shallowness, upon examination, turns out to be strategic or ironic in nature. It served various rhetorical and pedagogic purposes. Among those purposes was Xenophon's effort to protect political life from what he too feared were some potentially corrosive aspects of the "problem of Socrates." Not least, Xenophon presents himself, in his *Anabasis*, as perfectly capable of combining Socratism and heroism.

But Xenophon's seeming shallowness also amounts to a substantive critique of "depth" or "profundity" as the appropriate standards for evaluating philosophical teachings. For Xenophon's Socrates "discovered the paradoxical fact that, in a way, the most important truth is most obvious truth, or the truth of the surface" (142). His Socrates would seem far less vulnerable to the central charge made by both Nietzsche and Heidegger against Greek and subsequent thought, namely, that it is "metaphysical" or prone to evade the world by escaping into a "beyond-world."

The chief feature of the problem of Socrates, for Strauss, is perhaps the most basic: which Socrates was the true one and which caused the problems? Precisely because (with the able assistance of Aristophanes) they anticipated every one of the "problems" associated with Socrates, Plato and Xenophon dedicated their extraordinary rhetorical skills to presenting a variety of

5 Hegel proves the great exception among the late moderns to this tendency: "If we inquire whether [Xenophon] or Plato depicts Socrates to us most faithfully in his personality and method, the externals of his teaching, we may certainly receive from Plato a satisfactory, and perhaps a more complete representation of what Socrates was. But in regard to the content of his teaching and the point reached by him in the development of his thought, we have in the main to look to Xenophon" (Hegel 1995, 1:414).

6 Xenophon was thought far too simple and honest to understand the thought of Socrates and, beginning with Niebuhr's critique in 1844, his readiness to assist Agesilaus against the Athenians opened him to the perhaps somewhat contrary criticism of being an unpatriotic scoundrel and ingrate. Only the adventurer Xenophon, as presented in his own work the *Anabasis*, continued to arouse any admiration. Bury (1900, 524–25) refers to him as "a man of ready speech and great presence of mind."

Socratic faces, not all of which represented the “Socrates whom [his] disciples have celebrated” (104). But Xenophon differs from Plato in several important matters. While Plato presents Socrates as rather more profound or at any rate more “tragic,” he also presents him as more of a questioning being, intent on problematizing all with which he comes in contact. Xenophon’s Socrates is shown raising fewer questions and inclines toward teaching if not hectoring his listeners to a greater commensurate degree. Yet, as Strauss points out, Xenophon announces with an unusual degree of clarity and emphasis that Socrates “never ceased considering what each of the beings is” (*Memorabilia* 4.6.1; quoted at 141). In fact, Strauss shows that the best manuscript reading of this sentence indicates that Socrates never ceased considering what each of the beings is when “among” his companions, i.e., during or through the apparently unphilosophic conversations which Xenophon never tires of reporting.

1 Strauss’ Apology of Xenophon

In order to turn to Xenophon as “the most reliable source” for establishing the character of a Socratic teaching (126), Strauss is compelled to resurrect the reputation and stature of Xenophon himself. Quite simply, Xenophon was considered, by most 20th century classicists, to be “not very intelligent, not to say that he is a fool” (127). After rebutting John Burnett’s arguments that Xenophon was too young to have learned with or from Socrates and was instead intrigued only by Socrates’ military reputation, Strauss turns to what is admittedly the most serious accusation against Xenophon being a philosopher: Xenophon flatly denies that Socrates had anything to do with natural science (see *Memorabilia*, 1.1.11 on not even discussing the “nature of the cosmos”; 1.1.15 on the question of whether students of nature wish to gain somehow from that knowledge or whether they are satisfied with mere knowledge). Xenophon wrote this, however, not as a “historian” (i.e., a straightforward reporter of the facts) but as a writer of “fiction” or, more precisely, as a rhetorician (128). The denial—which on closer inspection amounts to less of a denial outright than a suggestion that Socrates did not *openly* discuss cosmology and was uncommonly sensitive to the *motives* that lay behind any such investigations—was in the service, not of presenting the truest portrait of Socrates, but of defending him from the charges of not believing in the gods of Athens and of corrupting the youth. As a result, Xenophon rigorously followed his own dictum (which Strauss quotes in full from the *Anabasis*) of “remembering” (i.e., of recording for posterity) the good rather than the bad (i.e. what might lend credence to the charges against Socrates).

In order to help us begin to appreciate Xenophon as thinker, Strauss gives an extremely brief and intensive lesson in Xenophon's manner of writing. Wherever possible, he states the "good" features of the theme or individual under consideration and remains silent on the troubling ones. But lest this be thought to mean that Xenophon failed to see those aspects concerning which he remained silent, Strauss highlights several devices by which Xenophon leads the reader to see them for himself. He offers examples of three such devices: 1) after establishing a pattern or list of several positive features, Xenophon will then speak of something or someone possessing one of them—this being tantamount to denying that it or he possessed the others; 2) using the phrase "it is said" in such a way as to suggest that what follows is not necessarily true and, in particular, that what follows constitutes an expression of people's moral hopes and longings; and 3) the use of puzzling or incomplete titles for his works.

Strauss then devotes an entire paragraph to a particularly important if diffuse and obscure Xenophontic device: his use of Aristophanean memes and phrases to convey crucial facts about Socrates. "In some way Aristophanes is present in Xenophon's works." Strauss then offers two examples meant to demonstrate that Xenophon's Socratic writings "constitute a reply to Aristophanes' *Clouds* on the level of the *Clouds*" (130). The first example turns on what appears to be a massive difference between the Aristophanean and the Xenophontic Socrates: the latter was urbane and patient while the former was anything but. With one crucial exception (i.e., concession to Aristophanes): Xenophon's Socrates treats Xenophon himself in the same impatient and abusive manner in which Aristophanes' Socrates treats the foolish old man Strepsiades (see *Memorabilia* 1.3.8–13). Strauss leaves it to his listeners to investigate the parallel. Aristophanes' Socrates had become impatient at Strepsiades' proposal to evade repaying his creditors by killing himself (see *Clouds*, 779–783). Strepsiades, then, was guilty of foolishly reversing his priorities: injustice must serve life, not vice versa. That Socrates should show righteous indignation here is both amusing and serious: if injustice must serve life, then all the more so should justice serve life, and not vice versa. (Aristophanes' Socrates, then, would appear to be far less open to Nietzsche's criticisms.) In the Xenophontic parallel, Socrates appears angered⁷ by Xenophon's drastic underestimation of the danger posed by *eros*. Was Xenophon, then, guilty of failing to subordinate *eros* to thinking?⁸

7 It should be kept in mind that Socrates may have been play-acting for Critobulus, for whose sake the conversation was initiated in the first place (*Mem.*, 1.3.8).

8 Consider also Ischomachus's critique of erotic desire as incompatible with "diligence" or learning at *Oeconomicus* 12.13, a critique that Socrates does not challenge. Nietzsche appears

The second example consists of Xenophon's utilizing a line uttered (in a dream) by Pheidippides in the *Clouds* and placing it in the mouth of "the perfect gentleman Ischomachus" in the *Oeconomicus*. Whereas, Strauss suggests, Pheidippides was Socrates' pupil in injustice in the *Clouds*, Xenophon's Socrates is Ischomachus's pupil in justice. While this inversion might seem to suggest that Socrates was more modest and more just than Aristophanes had shown, there is a problem: Ischomachus was a bad teacher of justice, insofar as his case for it was weak and riddled with contradictions. Ischomachus himself concedes that even "when it is to my profit to say what is false, I cannot by Zeus, dear Socrates, succeed in making the worse argument appear the better." Accordingly, Socrates tells him that he will turn to the practice of virtue "tomorrow" (*Oec.* 11.25, 11.6). Xenophon's comic response to Aristophanes' comic attack on Socrates contains a not inconsiderable concession to him.

Xenophon proves a difficult thinker to comprehend. Strauss suggests that one begin by understanding Xenophon as falling somehow between, or combining the "two poles" of Socrates and Cyrus. Both are presented to the reader as "perfect captains." Each was able, that is, to rule men. Socrates "in arguments dealt as he wished with all who conversed with him" (*Mem.*, 1.2.14). And Cyrus was able to make "all obedient to himself" through the application of wisdom (i.e., both speech and deed) (*Cyropaedia*, 1.1.3). Yet, Strauss continues, there is a "radical difference" between Socrates and Cyrus, amounting to an outright "opposition" (131). Now, that difference is presented as though Socrates were deficient when compared to Cyrus: the former lacked courage (Xenophon omits to list it among Socrates' virtues) and he failed to act on or enforce the "royal art" of ruling, remaining satisfied with possessing it at the theoretical level. This apparent deficiency is made up for, however, when Socrates' understanding of the royal art is put into practice by his pupil Xenophon. For Xenophon, unlike his friend Proxenos (a pupil of Gorgias) proves more than tough enough to rule over both gentlemen and non-gentlemen. There is a greater "radical difference" between Socrates and the other wise men of his age than between him and Cyrus. The nub of that difference is Socrates' recognition of that aspect of human beings that is "recalcitrant to reason" (131).

By presenting this "recalcitrance" as a lesson that he learned from Socrates, Xenophon helps us to see why Socrates had berated him so harshly for underestimating the power of *eros*. Far from being a simple supplement to or distraction from the rigors of thinking, *eros* insinuates itself into the act of thinking,

to have overlooked passages such as these, for he states "Socrates was also a great *erotic*" (Nietzsche 1982, 477, emphasis in original).

bringing with it hopes and longings that redirect thinking and tempt it into seeing features of the cosmos that are not there.

2 The Political Teaching of Xenophon's Socrates

At the end of his second lecture, Strauss briefly explains the "system" of Xenophon's Socratic writings as a preliminary step to understanding the political teaching presented therein. This amounts to a veritable "blueprint" for understanding all of Strauss' works on the Xenophontic corpus. Based on some remarks (not quoted) in the *Memorabilia* (1.1.19), Strauss divides the Socratic writings on the basis of what they are meant to convey about Socrates. The *Memorabilia*, Strauss contends, is devoted to presenting Socrates' "justice," the *Oeconomicus* to Socrates as a "speaker," the *Banquet* to Socrates as a "doer," and the *Apology* to Socrates as a "silent deliberator or thinker" (132). Each work, then, serves as a key to unlock some of the puzzles in the others. In presenting Socrates' justice, for example, the *Memorabilia*, immediately after noting a man's life is divided into "speeches, deeds, and silent deliberations," goes on to defend Socrates vigorously for never "saying or doing anything contrary to sound religion" (1.1.20). We would have to examine the *Apology* in order to see whether his "silent deliberations" on the matter were so orthodox.

After providing this simple outline of Xenophon's Socratic works—and noting that Xenophon's longest Socratic work, the *Memorabilia*, merely "indicate[s] the nature of Socrates' true activity, but [does] not set it forth"—Strauss abruptly and without any preliminaries, sets it forth: Socrates was a genuine philosopher who contemplated the cosmos, but in a highly distinctive way. In rapid succession, he characterizes the "key" to Socrates' "understanding of the whole ("noetic heterogeneity"); the reasons why Socrates founded political philosophy; the fundamental "limitation" to the claims of political life; and (in the final paragraph of the Second Lecture) the meaning of Socratic "moderation."

Strauss' understanding of the Xenophontic Socrates' moderation might explain the rapid-fire account of the previous three topics. For, as Strauss states:

... recognition of the political and the nonpolitical, or, more fundamentally, recognition of the existence of essential differences, or of noetic heterogeneity, appears as moderation—as opposed to the philosophers preceding Socrates (133).

Strauss seems here to be offering a précis of Xenophon's account of Socrates' differences with the pre-Socratics, or more precisely of the fact that "he did

not converse about the nature of all things *in the way* most of the others did—examining what the sophists called the cosmos” (*Mem.*, 1.1.11, emphasis added). Whether or not the sophists call it the cosmos (which is also what Socrates, Xenophon, and Strauss call it)—and whether or not Socrates approached it in a different way—there is apparently no denying that Socrates *did* investigate the cosmos. Xenophon’s “moderation” here entails attempting to obscure this fact from his readers.

Strauss, however, presents the moderation not as a concealment of the theoretical activity but as a characterization of it. And indeed, Xenophon’s Socrates observes:

... among those who are anxious about the nature of all things, some are of the opinion that being is one thing only, and others that it is an infinite multitude; and some that everything is always moving, and others that nothing ever moves; and some that everything comes to be and perishes, and others that nothing ever comes to be or perishes (*Mem.*, 1.1.14).

While Xenophon merely categorizes the extreme positions taken by various pre-Socratics, leaving the reader with the impression that the sensible Socrates had nothing to do with examining the “nature of all things,” Strauss takes the additional step of drawing the silent implication that Socrates himself, when examining the nature of all things, took the relevant moderate positions in each case, viz., “that there is a finite number of beings [“noetic heterogeneity”], that there are some unchangeable and some changeable things, and that there are some things that do not come into being and perish” (142).

In order, then, to defend Xenophon from the charge that he was a “fool,” Strauss is compelled to reveal what Xenophon “moderately” kept under wraps: that Socrates did pursue natural science—the investigation into the nature of all things. In the context of the lecture, this is tantamount to conceding that Aristophanes was right about Socrates’ chief concerns. As if to compensate, Strauss goes Xenophon one better in arguing against Aristophanes’ other claim regarding Socrates: that he ignored or was indifferent to political life. For he will not only point (in the Third Lecture) to Xenophon’s efforts to describe Socrates as “*the citizen, the statesman, the captain*” (134, emphasis in the original), he here quickly salutes Socrates as the “founder of political philosophy, or political science” (132)—a claim not openly advanced by Xenophon, who never uses either phrase. Political philosophy is presented at first as following from the fact of noetic heterogeneity. That is, insofar as “political things are in a class by themselves,” it would seem to follow that a separate branch of philosophy, heretofore unrecognized by the pre-Socratics who disdained politics

(treating it as a mere convention, not to be classified among the “nature” of all things), would need to be founded enabling thinkers to philosophize about those political things. In distinguishing its subject matter, however, political philosophy comes to recognize that “there is an essential difference between the common good and the private or sectional good.”⁹ And, however much Socrates respected and rehabilitated the former, he learned—through recognizing the “limitations” of the “claim raised by the polis”—that there is a “way of life . . . which transcends the political life and which is the highest.”

3 The Philosophic Response to the Poetic Critique

The Third Lecture is devoted entirely to Xenophon. It begins, however, by restating the Aristophanic critique of philosophy. Because Aristophanes understood philosophy so well, and chiefly because he accepted the fundamental distinction between nature and convention, his ultimate criticism of philosophy may be understood as the most serious and penetrating critique of all. The critique, very briefly sketched by Strauss, amounts to this: the philosopher may correctly understand the nature of the world and the “cosmos,” but he does not understand humanity or therefore himself. This is most clearly seen in the philosopher’s failure to appreciate the political life: “philosophy . . . simply transcends the political life” (134).¹⁰ Because Aristophanic poetry does not make this error, because it appreciates political life even as it ridicules it, it can be the “capstone of wisdom.”

Strauss suggests that both Plato and Xenophon respond to this charge by presenting the contrary case: it is philosophy—or rather a kind of “Platonic psychology”—that is the “capstone of wisdom.” Far from failing to ascertain self-knowledge, Socrates mastered it as no one before ever had.

In turning to Xenophon, Strauss repeats two points from his previous lecture. Xenophon must be understood with reference to the two “poles” of his

9 Xenophon characteristically raises this problem in an extremely restrained way. After presenting Ischomachus as “praying” that he might find a common good between himself and his wife (“what is best for both of us”), he shows him silently dropping the hope for a common good (which goes unmentioned) precisely where it would most be needed or expected: in the conjunction of the “ambitious man” and those over whom he would rule (*Oec.*, 7.7, 14.10). Instead of something good, the ambitious man receives something “noble”: “praise and honor.” Cf. *Mem.*, 3.5.28.

10 Of course, Strauss had already conceded at the end of the Second Lecture that the theoretical life transcends the political life. Having learned from Aristophanes, however, Socrates did not do so “simply.”

thought, Cyrus and Socrates. And his manner of writing must be understood before one can hope to understand him. Strauss compares Xenophon's writing style to that of Jane Austen: both are governed by the principle that "it is preferable to speak of the good things rather than the bad" (134–35). He adds a crucial proviso, however, to what he had said on this subject in the Second Lecture: "good" can mean "what is truly good" or "what is generally thought to be good." Xenophon, Strauss suggests, makes every effort to emphasize the ways in which Socrates comported with the latter. The unstated implication is that not only did Socrates in fact dedicate himself to "what is truly good," but the latter could well seem not to be "what is generally thought to be good."

Strauss immediately illustrates this unspoken thesis with a brief explanation of Xenophon's "apology" or defense of Socrates. After stressing Socrates' law-abidingness (generally thought to be a good thing), Xenophon also argues that Socrates benefited everyone with whom he came in contact. This too is generally thought to be good, so much so that (as Strauss cites elsewhere) "the many mainly define as good those who benefit them" (*Hellenica*, 7.3.12). In their readiness to accept benefits, then, the many are themselves implicitly willing to justify that aspect of Socratic morality that goes beyond "being *merely* legally just" (135, emphasis added). Whether the good of the many is superior or inferior to one's own good (and whether Socrates did not ultimately seek the latter) is not here considered.

The remainder of the Lecture is devoted to outlining some key points in the four Socratic writings. Strauss begins with the *Memorabilia* and shows that its chief concern was to show Socrates' justice, "both legal and trans-legal." In the face of the specific indictment made against Socrates, this suggests that he did not commit impiety and did not corrupt the young. Strauss then turns, once again, to categorizing the other three Socratic works. By way of clarifying the *Symposium*, however, Strauss points out that the *Hellenica* presents the deeds performed by gentlemen "in earnest." And, by way of clarifying the gentleman, Strauss notes that the *Hellenica* treats all discussion of tyrants as digressions, since "the tyrant is, of course, the opposite of the gentleman" (136).

Strauss gives the impression at this stage that he considers Socrates to be a gentleman ("Socrates . . . and other gentlemen as well"; 135). Several pages later, however, Strauss finally turns to the *Oeconomicus*, in which Socrates recounts his all-important meeting with the perfect gentleman, Ischomachus. That meeting enabled Socrates to become a teacher of gentlemanship (to Critobulus). Strauss does not bother to note that, just as Socrates could be a teacher of political rule without engaging in it, so he could have been a teacher of gentlemanship without engaging in it, or being a gentleman. Since

gentlemanliness turns out to be "guided by opinions alone," it should come as no surprise that Socrates could not but transcend it (148).

Having quietly raised questions about both Socrates' law-abidingness and his gentlemanliness, Strauss devotes some time to explaining the *Memorabilia's* defense of Socrates' justice. This entails Xenophon's response to both of the charges made against Socrates: corruption of the youth and impiety. Xenophon, Strauss tells us, elaborates on the "rather vague" corruption charge by explaining that Socrates was suspected of "induc[ing] his companions to look down with contempt on . . . democracy" and making them "men of violence" (136). In yet another example of speaking of the good and not mentioning the bad, Xenophon emphatically denies Socrates would ever promote violence while not even attempting to deny that Socrates made his companions look down with contempt on "the established laws" (137). Part of Xenophon's defense of Socrates' justice, then, consists of admitting that Socrates was not "unqualifiedly just."

The final portion of Xenophon's response to the "corruption" charge involves his explanation of Socrates' most wayward students, Alcibiades and Critias. The more or less formal response to the charge entails claiming that the two were bad upon leaving Socrates and that they left because Socrates disapproved of their ways. "In order to show the wickedness of Alcibiades," Strauss notes, Xenophon presents a dialogue Alcibiades once had with his godfather, the great Athenian statesman Pericles. In the dialogue, Alcibiades raises a question that Socrates never dares to raise in Xenophon's writings, namely "what is [a] law?" In the course of the brief dialogue, summarized by Strauss, we can see why Socrates carefully avoided raising the question. For, in the dialogue, Alcibiades compels Pericles to admit that a law owes its lawfulness "not to its democratic origin but to its goodness" (137). Moreover, insofar as a democratic majority forces its laws on the minority, without persuading it, it has no moral superiority to a tyranny or oligarchy that imposes its laws. Not only does this exchange implicitly concede that Socrates did teach his students to look down on the democracy, it shows that at least this aspect of Alcibiades' wickedness did not simply post-date his having left Socrates. While still a student of Socrates, Alcibiades showed distinct signs of being a true Socratic. Strauss concludes this passage by noting that Xenophon "does not even attempt to deny" the charge that Socrates often invoked a passage from the *Iliad* to show (apparently approvingly) that Odysseus spoke one way to "outstanding men" and quite another way to the common people—itsself a rather undemocratic practice.

In defending Socrates from the "graver" charge and more widely held belief that Socrates was guilty of impiety, Xenophon argues that Socrates often did

and said pious things and was always in the open, in public. Yet, given the need for some conformity with public opinion on this issue (as was alluded to in the Alcibiades/Pericles dialogue), this proves little, especially as to Socrates' private thoughts. Thus, Strauss observes, "there is one, and only one, universally known fact" attesting to Socrates' piety: his behavior at the trial of the generals from Arginusae. But Socrates' action there—an appeal to the law requiring separate trials for each general rather than the trial *en masse* that the excessively pious Athenian citizens were demanding to appease the gods—can prove only Socrates' "justice," not his sharing of the piety of the citizens. Socrates here appeals to justice understood as strict adherence to the law in order to deny the demos what it wants and instead to protect the generals whose cool-headed action had served the common good (they had sought to save the remaining soldiers rather than pick up for burial the bodies of those who had died in the sea-battle).

Having demonstrated various limits to Socrates' piety and even his justice, Xenophon is then shown by Strauss to suggest that, in both cases, Socrates' behavior could be defended by an appeal to a higher standard: the "translegal" justice of benefiting his "fellow men" (a category broader than that of "fellow citizen"). Socrates did this by "leading them" to excellence or to virtue. (Socrates' behavior at the trial of the generals can at best be understood as restraining his fellow citizens from committing the unjust act of ingratitude to Athens's generals and thereby from harming themselves.) To "lead" people to virtue is a far greater accomplishment than merely to "exhort" them to virtue (the activity we see Socrates engaged in throughout the bulk of the *Memorabilia*). Accordingly, Strauss turns our attention to Book Four, the only section in which Socrates can be said to be teaching someone or leading him to virtue. Strauss repeats the two rhetorical principles that guide Xenophon's Socrates: he helped not only by being serious but also by joking, and he did not approach all men in the same manner. After showing how Xenophon distinguished men into good and not so good natures, Strauss brings us to see that the student with whom Socrates spends time in Book Four is one of the not so good natures: Euthydemus is distinguished by his conceit. Strauss concludes that Xenophon never shows us Socrates addressing or teaching a first-rate nature (a conclusion he also draws in his analysis of *Memorabilia* 3.1–7, in which we are led to expect—but are not granted—a dialogue between Socrates and Plato; 140–41). He does not draw the alternate conclusion: Socrates may have been engaged in educating not Euthydemus but rather the good natures (including Xenophon) who congregated around Socrates and his deficient pupil.¹¹

11 Xenophon indicates what must supplement the education given to Euthydemus not only by inserting in its midst a crucial chapter (on understanding the problem of justice as

Strauss then devotes a paragraph to Socrates' famous method of teaching: dialectics. He explicates Xenophon's distinction of Socratic dialectic into two sorts, one of which accomplishes the philosophical task of arriving at the truth, the other of which accomplishes the political task of achieving agreement. With those who contradicted or challenged Socrates on something he said, he brought the subject back to its basic presupposition, "that is to say, he raised the question What is? regarding the subject under discussion" (139, referring to *Mem.* 4.6.13–15). By thus engaging the contradictor, Socrates was able to lead him to "the truth." When talking to those who "merely listened" to (i.e., never challenged) him, however, Socrates merely proceeded on the basis of "generally accepted opinions" producing not truth but merely "agreement." The latter method of dialectics, Strauss tells us, is "the most important part of the political art." This suggests that in challenging Socrates, the contradictors were also challenging the commonly accepted principles of the political life surrounding them. It is only this group of good natures, addressed via the true dialectics, who can be led to human excellence or virtue.

Having suggested that Xenophon's Socrates has a rather limited relation with most of his fellow citizens, and that he is never presented in conversation with the best natures, Strauss anticipates that his audience will start to wonder whether Socrates could be known to possess the virtue and human excellence that he was thought to teach. Here too, Strauss is obliged to report that Xenophon is "very sparing in his explicit praise of Socrates" (139). The highest praise Xenophon openly offers is to say "he seemed to me to be blessed" (140). He says this upon recounting Socrates' activity with his "good friends": they examine the "treasures" (i.e., books) of the wise men of old and if they see something good they "pick it out and [they] regard it as a great gain when [they] become useful to one another" (140, referring to *Mem.*, 1.6.14). Again, Strauss notes that Xenophon never provides an instance of this activity. He does not explain if Socrates was "blessed" for having had such friends or, having such friends, for being able to make great gains in wisdom.

the possible resolution to the problem of our apparent inability to resolve the conflicting claims of reason and revelation) with a different interlocutor altogether (Hippias; 4.4) but also by offering several editorial comments directly to the reader (not to Euthydemus): see 4.2.40 (on Socrates' intention to offer Euthydemus only the education that was "best for him"), 4.3.1–2, 18 (on the importance of moderation, especially about the gods, a conversation at which Xenophon himself was present), 4.5.12 (on the importance of dialectics understood as the separating of things "according to class"), 4.6.1 (where Xenophon says he'll illustrate Socrates' manner of examining what each of the beings is while "in the midst of" his companions; cf. 4.6.7 where Euthydemus reveals his unfamiliarity with Socrates' view of the beings as a finite number of classes); 4.6.12 (on Socrates' regime analysis), and 4.6.13–15 (on the two distinct types of dialectics used by Socrates).

Immediately after noting the “missing peak” of Book Three—namely the absence of a pointed-to conversation between Socrates and Plato—Strauss turns to what he calls “Socrates’ chief preoccupation”: the consideration of “what each of the beings is.” This would appear at least to be the subject matter of the missing conversation. Given the character of the conversations reported in the *Memorabilia*, none of which appear to be about “what each of the beings is,” Strauss wonders how Socrates could have been considering them in those conversations. In his later study of the *Memorabilia*, Strauss suggests accepting the reading of manuscript B, whereby Socrates merely considered what each of the beings is silently “in the midst of his companions” (*Xenophon’s Socrates*, 116–117). Now, this would suggest that the dialectical activity Socrates engaged in, even with his best companions, was “political philosophy,” preparatory to but distinct from his ultimate philosophical activity of considering what each of the beings is, an activity that he undertook alone (cf. the image of Socrates “dancing alone” as well as his admission that, in the midst of a drinking party, he was considering certain problems of natural philosophy; *Symposium*, 2.17–19, 7.4).

4 Socrates’ Response to Heidegger

Strauss’ elaboration of the manner in which Socrates “considered each of the beings” constitutes his most detailed explication of Socratic philosophizing proper and therewith his most important defense of that philosophizing against the Heideggerian critique of it. That critique, to repeat, was based on the contention that philosophy, beginning with Socrates, could not withstand “the storms of becoming” on the ocean of Being—that is, it forced Being into the Procrustean beds of “beings” so as to make understanding them and thereby mastering them easier or at least possible. Was Socrates, however, guilty of this behavior? Strauss stresses Socrates’ dialectical approach, namely his “distinguishing things according to their kinds or classes” (141). Rather than treating all facets of “what is” (nature) as commensurate, Socrates understood nature to be comprised of “noetic heterogeneity,” i.e., of a “finite number of kinds or classes of things, that is to say, the beings which we intend when we raise the question ‘what is’” (142). Socrates resisted the pre-Socratic (and Heideggerian) temptation of finding a single thing (Water or Ether or Will to power or Being) that compromised a unified answer to the question “what is.” For Socrates, the “whole is not one, nor homogeneous, but heterogeneous” (141). This Socratic approach, Strauss suggests, is proof against the Heideggerian charge of forcing the world into categories so as the better to control it and take comfort from it:

The discovery of noetic heterogeneity permits one *to let things be what they are* and takes away the compulsion to reduce essential differences to something common. . . . [T]he fact that there is a variety of being, in the sense of kinds or classes, means that *there cannot be a single total experience of being*, whether the experience is understood mystically or romantically, the specific romantic assertion being that feeling, or sentiment, or *a certain kind of sentiment*, is this total experience (142–43, emphasis added).

Socrates seems to have shared with Heidegger the view that “Dasein” (the human being) is the key to understanding Sein or Being itself, for it is only through the former that we can have access to the latter. Yet he resisted the Heideggerian temptation to find in “a certain kind of sentiment,” namely *Angst*, a single “total experience of being.” And he was perhaps more sensitive than Heidegger to the problem posed by the fact that, in seeking to interpret the world, we are apt to make demands on it. In fact, Socrates warns against the characteristic error to which the pre-Socratics (to which Heidegger urged us to return)—as well as the moderns—were prone. For they

... hold that after they understand the necessities responsible for each thing coming to be they will make winds, rains, seasons and everything else of the sort *they need* whenever they wish (*Mem.*, 1.1.15, emphasis added).

Socrates, by contrast, was able to rest satisfied “merely to understand in what way each of the things of this sort comes to be” (*ibid.*).

In order to establish the distinction between these two approaches—the distinction upon which rests the possibility of Socratic philosophizing—Strauss makes the seemingly incongruous suggestion that “Socrates founded political science” (142). What bearing on our relationship with “understanding the beings” might this discovery have? We have already seen that Socratic political science enabled him to distinguish between the political and the non-political things. Furthermore, we have seen that the discovery served to defend Socrates from Aristophanes’ charge that he neither understood nor properly respected politics. We now see that it enabled Socrates to liberate himself from the political or moral needs—the “most urgent” things (133)—that are apt to color and skew the investigation into what is. In his conversation with Ischomachus, Socrates discovers that it is the “perfect gentleman” (and not the Socratic philosopher) who imposes his needs—and thereby an order—onto the world. Recounting a prior conversation that he had with a Phoenician

ship's captain, Ischomachus tells Socrates (something he apparently did not dare tell his wife)¹² the reason for the marvelous order in which all the ship's possessions are kept:

“[W]hen the god raises a storm at sea,” he said, “there’s no time to search for whatever may be needed or to get out something from an awkward place” (*Oeconomicus*, 8.16).

We create or posit order, that is, in response to a fundamentally uncaring universe. Ischomachus is impressed by the Phoenician captain's account of both the harsh nature of the universe and of his necessarily limited and still hopeful effort to protect himself from it. Yet, while he transmits to his wife (whose education makes up the opening section of the dialogue with Socrates) the importance of order, he omits to tell her of the terrifying fact to which it is a response. She is simply told that they will get what they need—and their household will prosper—if “everything is kept ordered in its place” (8.22).

Now, a thing's “place” has two possible meanings for Socrates. First it can mean (as the Phoenician captain seems to have meant) the place *we* put it, for our eventual use of it. But it can also mean its “natural” place, the kind or class of thing to which it must be ascribed. In an effort to remind Ischomachus of this key difference, Socrates asks “how did *you* [Ischomachus] separately order them for her?” (9.2, emphasis added). In response, Ischomachus reveals that, among other things, he separates the male and female servants (by a “bolted door”) so that “they won't produce offspring without our knowledge” (9.5). Ischomachus's separation, that is, is a *political* order that, far from respecting the natural separation (noetic heterogeneity) that divides men and women into distinct classes, actually impedes the natural purpose or goal of the two classes. The distinct ideas of men and women do not entail the (perhaps politically desirable) physical separation of them.

Strauss continues to elaborate Socrates' “political science” with its connection to his philosophizing in mind. The fundamental part of Socrates' “analysis of the political” is his consideration of the “phenomenon of the law” (143). The law's efforts to place limits on what we may do and not do is necessarily philosophical in aspiration, since its requirements are understood to be “not until further notice, or for a given time, but *forever*” (143, emphasis added). The law, as Socrates says elsewhere, “wishes to be being” (Plato, *Minos* 315a). In order to evaluate this aspiration of law, Strauss notes, Socrates turns to an analysis of

12 Ischomachus' discussion of the Phoenician is addressed solely to Socrates (8.11). He turns back to recounting what he said to his wife at 8.17.

regimes. Strauss finds in that analysis a series of limitations on the law. First, only certain regimes (monarchy, aristocracy) abide by the law; others, such as tyranny and oligarchy, depend only on the will of the ruler. It proves almost impossible to classify republican, democratic government as a good regime or not, since there the law *is* the will of the rulers (i.e., the people). Thus, Socrates must, second, turn to classifying regimes by whether they are apt to produce good laws or not. Since the wise are the most apt to produce good laws, those regimes are best that most enable "the rule of the wise." But rather than—or by—fulfilling the aspiration of the law, by becoming "a seeing law," the rule of the wise reveals the fundamental flaw in all law: lacking "flexibility," every law "is blind to some extent" (144).

In considering the revolutionary character of the rule of the wise—Strauss points to the example of the young Cyrus seeking to redistribute (all) possessions to those for whom they are most fitting (as well as to the fact that Cyrus was punished for having suggested this)—Strauss immediately raises the question of whether even the wise are not limited by "natural law, or natural right." Even though Xenophon never mentions either topic by name, his Socrates does, at one point, discuss "unwritten laws" (145, referring to *Mem.*, 4.4.19ff). But these "self-enforcing" laws, focusing on incest (the very topic whose broaching by Pheidippides ultimately brought his father's destructive ire upon Socrates in the *Clouds*), prove (by Socratic omission) insufficient to sanctify the family.

Third, Strauss shows that the rule of the wise is severely limited by the unwise nature of those to be ruled. Xenophon's "homey" illustration of this essential limitation on the rule of the wise—or on enlightenment—consists of Socrates' relation with his wife Xanthippe. Not only could Socrates never persuade or rule Xanthippe, he counseled his son (who complained of her harsh mistreatment of him to his father) to bear her ill-treatment as an unalterable necessity (see *Mem.*, 2.2). Since wisdom or reason, then, cannot hope to rule directly, the best that can be hoped for is the "very indirect rule of the wise" (146). This amounts to a kind unofficial alliance or partnership between the wise and the decent or the gentlemanly class. Such a regime—the best regime—would promote the cultivation of virtue, not the pursuit of wealth. Strauss here notes that Cyrus subverted that best regime (even as he co-opted the virtue that had been produced in it), implying Socrates, at least in theory, promotes it.

Strauss then offers extremely quick sketches of two key Xenophontic characters: one wise ruler, Dercylidas, and one gentleman, Ischomachus's father. Dercylidas was the "greatest example" of "generous and effective leadership" known to Xenophon (147). Strauss tells us just enough about him to see that

his superiority stemmed in part from his ability to distance himself from the Spartan regime in which he found himself ("he always loved to be away from home") and his un-Spartan gentleness (he was "once punished by the Spartan authorities for what they regarded as lack of discipline"). His nickname ("Sisyphus") is said to indicate his "outstanding resourcefulness"; Strauss doesn't mention its further association with "futility," save for his mention that Dercylidas's successor was the "somewhat pompous martinet, Agesilaus." Ischomachus's father, we are told, could not resist buying, improving, and flipping every run-down farm he came upon. Socrates, on the other hand, promoted "administering one's wealth rather than increasing it" as the "life most fitting a gentleman." Ischomachus's father clearly gave a wider berth to the pursuit of gain than to the cultivation of virtue. Both with regard to rare but high leadership and to the more routine and steadying influence of the gentleman, then, Strauss brings out the severe limits or compromises that will always be found in political life.

As a result, Strauss concludes that Xenophon is in fundamental agreement with Plato that "the political is essentially imperfect" (147). Its claim to be fundamentally superior to the private life devoted to philosophy, then, fails. Rather than base this conclusion on a comparison between Socrates and Cyrus (the highest if what is "characteristic of the political is adhered to and thought through"), however, Strauss suggests that the tension between the two ways of life is most clearly presented in the *Oeconomicus*. In the very brief summary of that dialogue which follows, Strauss demonstrates the contrast between gentlemanliness or "ordinary morality" which can be learned quickly, "simply by listening" and philosophy whose "transpolitical morality" requires extensive intellectual effort and even "knowledge" (148–49). While Socrates is capable of learning gentlemanliness from Ischomachus simply by "listening," however, Ischomachus's even more extensive efforts at teaching his wife how to be a wife, Strauss emphasizes, prove to be a failure. Subsequent to the action recounted in the *Oeconomicus*, Strauss reports, Ischomachus's wife had an affair with their son-in-law. The love of order—and of overseeing a well-run household—that Ischomachus tried to instill in his wife did not meet or overcome her erotic longings. In fact, Ischomachus may well have misinterpreted his wife's initial blush upon being unable to provide him with something he had brought into the household (the incident that led to Ischomachus's entire education of his wife to appreciation of moral order). Rather than having been unable to locate the item (as he assumed), Ischomachus's wife may well have given it away to a "friend" (cf. her blush at 8.1 with Ischomachus's unwitting concession to her in the previous paragraph that the "pleasure" she can hope

to derive from her marriage and children may not replace those to be enjoyed by the "beauties of youth"; 7.42–43).

Ischomachus's theoretical failure to understand and appreciate the power of eros—which reminds us of the comparable failure on the part of Xenophon with which Strauss began his discussion—is contrasted, toward the end of the lecture, with Socrates' understanding of friendship. The two notions, in fact, are presented as indicative of the fundamental "incompatibility" (149) of the two ways of life under consideration. We seem to be left with the conclusion that, where Ischomachus tries and fails to win his wife's love in return for the benefit of moral order that he seeks to confer on her, Socrates succeeds at gaining a benefit from his friends (which he treats as "money") in his pursuit of virtue.

Strauss concludes the lecture¹³ with a reconsideration of the findings and the function of Socrates' political philosophy. Xenophon has demonstrated that the way of life of the philosopher "transcends the political life." The claim of the political life that the common good has a higher dignity than the private good (cf. 143: "The polis presents itself as exalted far above the household and the individual") necessarily fails. Yet Xenophon and his Socrates, refusing to separate moderation from wisdom, do not for these reasons dismiss political life. While the theoretical life is the highest way of life, political life, they both concede, is more "urgent" than the theoretical life. This recognition requires the ultimate act of moderation, their willingness to recognize "opinions which are not true, but salutary to political life" (133=177). Rather than being a "branch" of philosophy, then, political philosophy serves to vindicate the life of philosophy against the claims of the polis. Socrates' limiting himself to the study of the "human things," while seeming to elevate political life over the "madness" of theoretical life, was ultimately in the service of philosophy, since

the human or the political things are indeed the clue to all things, to the whole of nature, since they are the link or bond between the highest and the lowest . . . or since the human or political things . . . are the form in which the highest principles first come to sight, or, since the false estimate of the human things is a fundamental and primary error (133=177).

13 As the more complete 1995 version of the lecture reveals, Strauss actually concludes with an apology for having "gone on a bit longer" than he had wished and for unspecified "other reasons" that his plan had "gone wrong" (178). He appears to have in mind the failure to have discussed in any detail either the *Symposium* or the *Apology*, as implicitly promised.

Having falsely understood Socrates to have dismissed the human things and needs ("life" as Nietzsche calls them), Nietzsche and Heidegger appear to have made this "fundamental and primary error" of overestimating the human things. Their failure to appreciate the manner in which Socrates considered the human things, above all their failure to appreciate political philosophy, led to their failure to appreciate the ultimate philosophical insight of Socrates: noetic heterogeneity. "Philosophy is primarily political philosophy," Strauss concludes, "because political philosophy is required for protecting the inner sanctum of philosophy" (133=177).

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“Through the Keyhole”: Leo Strauss’ Rediscovery of Classical Political Philosophy in Xenophon’s *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*

Richard S. Ruderman

The decade of the 1930s was, for much of the civilized world, a dark and darkening period. Not only was the West in the grips of a Great Depression, but its self-confidence was at perhaps its lowest ebb. After all, European liberalism (and the individualism that was thought to be its most beautiful flower) was being abandoned for Marxism and fascism; science—which was not a little implicated in the deaths of millions in the Great War—was increasingly seen as both evil and as a merely parochial Western view; and political science, having once been viewed as the queen of the social sciences, was increasingly viewed as impotent, at least with regard to generating the most needful thing of all, values. Collectivism in politics, irrationalism for the spirit, and a tired recounting of a tradition of political thought that no longer could speak to us—such was the “spirit of the age” that, already a generation earlier, Spengler had dubbed the “Going-Under of the West.”

Toward the end of that decade, Leo Strauss, a then little-known German émigré scholar to America, published his first article on classical political philosophy, an interpretation of Xenophon’s *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*. The immediate impression of scholarly abstractedness, unaware of the gathering storms just outside his study, seems redoubled when we look back from the vantage point of the later Strauss, who was anything but shy about openly invoking the “crisis of the West” and “the crisis of political philosophy”—usually in the opening paragraphs of his writings—as grounds for returning to the thought of classical antiquity.¹ In this essay, however, he appears to be silent about the state of the world in which he lives and writes. Moreover, in selecting Xenophon’s *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* as his subject, Strauss seems to be making every effort to evade, rather than to engage, the pressing issues of political philosophy as then understood. After all, the greatest thinkers of the period, Nietzsche and Heidegger, had pronounced Socratic philosophy to be the decisive wrong turn taken by mankind. And Xenophon was hardly viewed

1 See, for example, Strauss (1953) 7–8.

as a Socratic worthy of *Dekonstruktion*: whatever his charms may be, the ability to grasp the intricacies of Socrates' most subtle teaching was not thought to be among them. Even if, in some perverse way, that failing could be turned to Xenophon's advantage—that is, if he could be shown to represent the poetic tradition of heroic overreaching that Socrates had undermined or destroyed—Strauss' choice of the *Constitution* fails to capitalize on it: far from there being a commanding Cyrus in its pages, the Spartan citizens (and even, to a considerable extent, its rulers) we meet there prove to be more or less interchangeable and unheroic.

In contrast to the high drama associated with Nietzsche and Heidegger, then, Strauss' first effort at a recovery of classical political philosophy seems modest to a fault. And yet, toward the end of his essay, Strauss does briefly indicate what it is about the contemporary political and philosophical situations that require overcoming if, indeed, a return to the classics is to be viable. First, in the midst of explaining the necessity and purpose of esoteric writing, Strauss observes that esoteric writing disappeared "at a rather recent date" and that "its reappearance is simultaneous with the reappearance of persecution" (535).² This quiet allusion to the persecution then rearing its ugly head in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany is Strauss' sole reference to the contemporary situation. Second, Strauss proposes that insofar as "the restitution of a sound approach is bound up with the elimination of Rousseau's influence," the writings of "men like Xenophon" are precisely the "antidote" we need. Now, Strauss does not attempt to delineate the scope and meaning of the "influence of Rousseau." But, as the topic of the essay leads us to recall, Rousseau was the most vocal and impassioned defender of "Sparta" in modern times. Nor was Rousseau merely engaged in historical romanticism. Rousseau's defense of "Sparta" in the midst of the advance of enlightenment liberalism was closely connected to his promotion of the "citizen" who was fully dedicated to his fatherland over the "bourgeois individual" who combined the selfish exploitation of his fellow citizens with a craven deference to popular tastes and public opinion. Insofar, then, as Rousseau's preference for Sparta had paved the way for both the Communist and the Fascist efforts to subordinate the individual to the state, or the *we*-species, or the *Volk*, it could not have been more timely to reexamine the original meaning of Sparta, or the allure of the "spirit of Sparta."

What then is at issue in "The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon"? The title, at a glance, would seem to consist of two ideas linked by a conjunctive "or": we need to recover something of the "taste of Xenophon" that ran toward

2 All unspecified page references are to Strauss (1939).

"the spirit of Sparta." But the "spirit of Sparta" alludes not so much to the "actual Sparta of the present or of the past" as to "the conviction that man belongs, or ought to belong, entirely to the city": "the incarnation of the political spirit was Sparta" (531). The spirit of Sparta, then, was alive and well, so to speak, in the "taste" of Stalin and of Hitler (not to mention Marx and Heidegger).³ Indeed, insofar as modern liberalism encourages a certain broad tolerance—tending to official indifference—toward morality, contemporary critics of liberalism cannot but be attracted to a Sparta that was, as Xenophon writes, "on the watch for those who are easy-going toward what was believed to be the noble" (*Const. Lac.* 4.4).⁴ Furthermore, as Strauss makes clear in the course of his interpretation of the satirical nature of Xenophon's encomium of Sparta, the "true name of that taste which permeates Xenophon's writings" is "philosophy" (531). The "or" in the title is disjunctive: "Sparta and philosophy are incompatible." As a call for a return to "Spartan virtue," then, Strauss' essay fails—though it succeeds in undermining Rousseau's parallel call. But it succeeds in pointing to the reasons why philosophy is the only available alternative to politics and life so understood.

Strauss announces a preference for the inconspicuousness of Xenophon at the start. This is not to say, however, that Strauss took Xenophon to be a lesser exemplar of the classical approach. As he wrote concerning his later book on Xenophon's *Hiero* in a letter to his friend Alexandre Kojève, he prefers to enter a room "through a keyhole."⁵ Xenophon, at least as much as his more openly theoretical and seemingly doctrinaire fellow classics Plato and Aristotle, compels his readers to think for themselves. Or rather, he is happy to present them with this simple alternative: take me at face value (and thus be charmed or even repelled by my apparent simplemindedness) or make the effort to connect the dots, and cross the T's in order to understand the truth behind the surface, but misleading presentation. Now this, in itself, stands opposed to Rousseau and his cult of sincerity. For Xenophon is ironic through and through. Strauss' admiration for such irony—and for esoteric writing more broadly—has led more than a few contemporary critics to accuse him of harboring a hidden and fiercely political agenda (namely, promoting the secret rule of the few). On the basis of this article, however, it is difficult to see how this could be so. For Xenophon's irony here is revealed to be, among other things, a political strategy whereby

3 Sparta had its less extreme, and thus perhaps more influential, champions as well, such as Mitford (1814) who had a strongly pro-Spartan and anti-Athenian bias.

4 All chapter and paragraph references are to Xenophon (1968). I have occasionally altered the translation for greater adherence to the literal meaning of the text.

5 Letter to Kojève, August 22, 1948, in Strauss (1991) 236.

he is able to mount a criticism of the Spartan regime—a regime that turns out to be nothing other than the hidden rule of the few. Strauss shows through his analysis that Xenophon chose to imitate in his writing the manner in which Sparta—or rather its founder, Lycurgus—exercised and accomplished such political rule. To put it another way: Xenophon could have openly denounced the various hypocrisies with which the Spartan regime was riddled. But this procedure would suffer from at least two serious defects. First, it would deny to readers the experience of uncovering those hypocrisies themselves. Since no regime or structure of authority has ever openly announced that it was being hypocritical, Xenophon wrote so that we might learn how to think through the various claims of authority to uncover their hypocrisies. (The extent to which people must reconsider the world they think they “know” is indicated by Xenophon in a comment he makes about the general view regarding the complexity of the Spartan infantry formation: “what most people imagine . . . is the exact opposite of the truth [lit. of what is]”; 11.5.) Second, unless one first feels the attraction of politics at its most alluring, one cannot learn from the subsequent discovery of hypocrisies within it. When one is taught something directly, textbook-style, there is no sense of what is missing; but when one is attracted to a positive goal (here, the life of political virtue), one will be like the Ephors described by Xenophon when outfitting the Spartans for war: “anything missing is not at all likely to be overlooked” (11.2).

In order to uncover Xenophon's teaching, Strauss pays particular attention to the plan of his work. The *Constitution* consists of 15 chapters: the first ten chapters outline the way of life that Lycurgus attempted to design for the Spartans; the next three turn to war; and the final two to the institution of monarchy at Sparta. From this design alone, the reader is tempted to draw the conclusions that the Spartan regime was designed to prepare the citizens for war; that the successful prosecution of war is and ought to be the highest purpose of political life; and that the Spartan king, as war-leader or general, is the ultimate ruler and even hero of Spartan life. As Strauss shows, however, Xenophon quietly indicates problems with each of these three theses by marring certain aspects of the plan of the work and by utilizing ambiguous expressions and references.

The most striking “flaw” in the book's plan, Strauss argues, is the appearance of Chapter 14, a chapter devoted to a harsh critique of contemporary Lacedaemonia. For, it seems, Lacedaemonia has so fallen away from Lycurgus' original institutions and laws that other Greeks, who used to “beg” her to lead them in the past, now band together to prevent Lacedaemonian hegemony (14.6). However effective Lycurgus' enactments were at the start—or were on paper—they have failed over time to accomplish their task. Let us examine

with some care what Lycurgus sought to accomplish and the manner in which he sought to do it.

1 Lycurgus' Founding

As mentioned above, Lycurgus wanted a city devoted to virtue—or what he and perhaps most others “believed” to be the noble. Rather than permit the myriad ways in which “all other cities” slacken in their pursuit of nobility, Lycurgus legislated from cradle to grave—nay, from prior to birth to beyond even death—with an eye toward developing the most “hardy” citizens, whose resourcefulness and physical toughness would always be available to the city whenever it needed to be at war. To produce the hardest soldiers, Lycurgus promoted a unique and unrestricted diet for young girls with respect to food and drink. Spartan girls, that is, were encouraged to indulge their pleasures—their “animal natures” as Strauss says (505)—and, as a result, their manners, especially in sexual matters, were lax. Now, Xenophon does not state any of this openly: he merely speaks of the strict and opposed general Greek practices. Moreover, while he speaks of the moral education of Spartan men (which made them continent), he says not a word about the moral education of the women. And Lycurgus prepared not just the womb, but even the sperm so as to produce the strongest offspring. For while he accepted a certain moral looseness in the women in order to produce robust mothers, he required a painful degree of self-control from the men to produce robust fathers: by making it shameful for husbands to be seen entering or leaving their wives' rooms, he made sexual intercourse rarer and, he believed, more likely to produce vigorous children. Lycurgus—and not only Lycurgus—believed that to deny ourselves pleasure is the first step toward the noble.

Thus Xenophon introduces the Lycurgan approach toward what we today call “gender differentiation.” The men, but not the women, are required to develop a strong sense of shame with respect to pleasure (especially sexual pleasure) resulting, as Strauss notes, in the odd fact that Spartan men are “stronger” (or “better”) at modesty than the women. Now, insofar as modesty is typically considered a female virtue (Strauss draws our attention to Plato, *Laws* 802e8–10), Xenophon thereby quietly raises the striking possibility that Spartan men, frequently regarded as the most manly, were in fact quite womanly in important ways. So complete was Lycurgus' desire for robust offspring that he was willing to denature both male and female Spartans—and so eager was he to produce many such young Spartans that he permitted both men

and their wives a “surprisingly large freedom to indulge in adultery” (506). The denaturing, that is, was not completely successful, and Lycurgus’ concessions to human nature led to a weakening of the family. (When Xenophon goes on to note that sexual intercourse with boys was refrained from “no less” than was incest, we cannot be too reassured, for the likelihood of incest rises with the increased obscurity of familial relations.)

Strauss next turns to “Spartan education.” This education turns out to be entirely “physical education”—there was apparently no liberal education in Sparta. Indeed, unlike the Persian education outlined at the beginning of the *Education of Cyrus*, the Spartan education did not even include an education in speech. One might say that Sparta extended her teaching regarding continence even to the act of speech. Xenophon’s apparent praise of this practice—which extends to his adopting a certain reticence in speech himself when discussing Sparta—cannot be viewed as sincere until we determine his attitude toward the importance of speech. Now Sparta, as Strauss shows throughout his essay, ranked deeds (especially actions in war) as higher than speech. Was this Xenophon’s view? Not only was Xenophon, of course, a student of Socrates, that master of speech, but he himself, in the course of leading the retreat of the Ten Thousand Greeks from Persia, utilized speech often and with exceptional success. From the point of view of action or war itself, then, speech appears to be insufficiently appreciated at Sparta. More than that, however, Xenophon raises the question of whether not speaking of certain things is the best method by which to minimize their presence or influence within the hearts and minds of the citizens.

Just as Xenophon suggests that speech (or thinking) may be superior to deed (or action), so too he holds that the soul is superior to the body (10.3). But while Xenophon does mention the ways in which Lycurgus strove to improve the bodies of the Spartans, he says next to nothing about how he sought to improve their souls. Xenophon notes that Lycurgus felt “toil” was “an employment of the soul” (7.4), but this suggests that keeping the soul distracted or exhausted (presumably by keeping the body hard at work) is the safest way to handle its natural inclinations toward “big ideas,” a certain “insolence” and the pursuit of “pleasure” (3.2).⁶ (One might note here that enlightenment liberalism’s promotion of equality, the private sphere, and a generally instrumental view of politics is no less hostile to these erotic longings of the soul than are its modern alternatives noted at the outset.) Strauss notes that Xenophon’s sole

6 Note also that 8.4 suggests the Spartans understand by “soul” nothing more than the life-giving force in the body.

reference to this undertaking consists of his "emphatic statement" (512) that Lycurgus "compelled all [the Spartans] to practice all virtues publicly" (10.4). He immediately goes on to note Xenophon's silence regarding any Spartan practice of the virtues of wisdom, justice, or moderation. And this should have been apparent from the start: insofar as the Spartan education in virtue consists of shaming and discipline alone, it cannot be expected to produce virtue, especially those virtues that cannot be compelled.

The use of political authority, then, to produce virtue can, at best, produce only "political virtue." Such virtue is to genuine virtue as compulsion is to freedom. This means that Sparta produces only such virtues as are valuable to the political community, not virtues that perfect or fulfill the individuals in that community. Rather than practice wisdom, moderation, and justice, the Spartans practice merely continence, bashfulness, and obedience (514). Now, even where these virtues seem similar, their differences are decisive. Continence might seem to share an "affinity" with moderation, for example. But continence (or self-control) is less an actual virtue than the foundation of virtues—and even, to be honest, of vices: thieves must exercise self-control in order successfully to carry out their tasks. Moderation, on the other hand, shapes the whole soul, as it were. It is practiced in the dark (when unobserved) no less than in the light (516). And the Spartans, Strauss shows, cannot be said to practice moderation, at least with respect to food, drink, and sex. The best that Xenophon seems able to say of them in this regard is that they practice it with respect to wealth. But here too there is a gap between Lycurgus' legal intention and actual Spartan practice. Lycurgus made every effort to limit the acquisition of wealth. He made it a shameful practice and he even required that Spartan money be so heavy as to make its private possession all but impossible. That he still had to institute searches for gold and silver suggests that many Spartans could not be compelled to give up their natural desire for wealth, but merely to seek natural substitutes for the useless conventional money Lycurgus issued. In fact, Xenophon quietly indicates not only the presence of wealthy men in Sparta but even their ability and readiness to contribute purchased food to the common store in place of the missing contributions of "those who are idle" (5.3). And while such generosity might appear to compensate for their having amassed wealth against the spirit and letter of the law (see 7.2–3), their capacity to purchase their contribution rather than hunt for it means that they are able to buy their way out of hunting, which Lycurgus wished to establish as the "noblest occupation" (4.7). This would seem to supply a standing and devastating critique of Spartan nobility: not only does it hold over the citizens when the necessity for it is removed, but its status as the poor man's substitute for wealth is all but broadcast.

The “spirit of Sparta,” it now becomes clear, consists in a suspicion of—or even hostility toward—self-concern and a corresponding effort to channel that self-concern toward a more self-sacrificing nobility. That spirit, as we noted, was alive in the 1930s and, in such movements as communitarianism, not to speak of religious fundamentalism, is alive today. It becomes of pressing concern, then, to determine whether Xenophon viewed Lycurgus as a failed attempt at carrying out an essentially admirable project, or whether he viewed the project itself as somehow flawed.

2 The Problem of the Noble

Lycurgus, to repeat, wished to keep a watch out for those who were “easygoing toward what is believed to be the noble” (4.4). That is to say, he wished to inculcate what today is known as “moral seriousness.” But perhaps there is a gap between “what is believed to be the noble” and genuine nobility. Let us reconsider Lycurgus’ view of nobility. So important to him was nobility that, despite the general Laconic opposition to speech, Lycurgus designed mixed generational mess tables to encourage the kind of conversation that would turn on recounting “noble deeds performed in the city” (5.6). Even Lycurgus, then, concedes that speech is needed to identify, praise, and even exhort to the performance of noble deeds. But while Xenophon concludes the parallel passage that explains Lycurgus’ efforts at developing the “legs, arms, and necks” of the citizens with the remark that “he succeeded” in doing so, he is silent with regard to the “success” of mess-table conversations about the noble (cf. 5.9 and 5.6). Were no such deeds performed that could be recounted? Or is the recital of noble deeds exclusively doomed to fail? That is, must not the “shameful” deeds (apparently buried in silence by Lycurgus) also be recounted, not least to help distinguish what it is that nobility consists in? Moreover, must not noble speeches (or at least reasoned speeches about the noble deeds) also be offered if nobility is to be properly understood and properly performed? Strauss summarizes Lycurgus’ accomplishments as follows:

By educating the Spartans in bashfulness only, while withholding from them true education—education in letters and speech, education in wisdom and moderation and justice—in other words, by frightening them into submissiveness with the menace of severe and dishonoring punishments, he compelled them to do forbidden things in utter secrecy. (517)

This means, Strauss concludes, that the "famous Spartan sense of shame is . . . simply hypocrisy." The decline in Sparta is not then, strictly speaking, a decline in Spartan virtue: it is merely a decline in their willingness or ability to dissimulate or to hide their deviations from the publicly permissible virtues.

There remains to be considered one final potential virtue of the Spartans, namely the most vaunted of their virtues, manliness or courage. Oddly, Xenophon mentions this word only once in the entire treatise—and there in so "exceedingly ambiguous" a usage (520) that most editors amend it (with no manuscript authority whatsoever) to its opposite (9.5; cf. 4.2 for a word whose root is "manly"). The one appearance of "manliness" comes in a passage devoted to explaining the endless shaming that must be faced by those Spartans who fail to live up to the noble standard of life in Sparta, above all to face willingly a "noble death" (9.1). Such losers are left out when teams pick sides; must give way in the street even to their juniors; and, "must support their spinster relatives at home and must suffer the blame for [or supply the cause of] manliness" (9.5). Now, unraveling the meaning of this exceedingly odd phrase is not easy. How would one explain the "cause of manliness"? We learn at the start of this brief chapter that manliness is caused by a readiness to "choose a noble death over a dishonorable life" (9.1). And that readiness is secured, as the end of the previous chapter suggests, by Lycurgus' having secured the Delphic Oracle's support for his laws. By doing this, Xenophon tells us, Lycurgus ensured that refusing obedience to the laws would henceforth not only be illegal, but "impious" (8.5). Thus, Spartan manliness, the willingness to accept or even seek out a noble death, is connected to religious belief. Indeed, the most Xenophon can say in defense of the willingness to die is that "more" people survive when soldiers are animated by it (not all or even the most brave are guaranteed survival) and glory (as well as political followers) will attend those who do survive. Manliness "accuses" in the same sense that the gods "accuse" those who fail to live up to their demands. Lycurgus wanted fear of the gods to add "willing" obedience to the public virtue compelled by fear of the regime.

The final theme of Strauss' essay, accordingly, is the connection between "political life" and "belief in the gods of the city" (532). While Lycurgus taught the Spartans to believe that the Delphic god had given them their laws, Strauss observes that Xenophon "distinguishes between the Spartans' obedience to Lycurgus' laws and their obedience to the god" (532).⁷ For, Strauss continues,

7 Rousseau concedes that legislators (such as Lycurgus), who are "unable to use either force or reasoning" to form a people, must always have "recourse to the intervention of heaven"

Xenophon raises the question of whether and in what manner the gods can interact or communicate with humans. Through the use of a simple trope, Xenophon compares the Spartans' feeding of their children with, first, their feeding of "the king and those with him" and, finally, their offering of "sacrifices to Zeus and to those with him" (533). In suggesting that the Spartans' sacrifices amounted to a "feeding" of the gods for their own political purposes, Xenophon delivers his ultimate criticism of the Spartan constitution: the Spartans wish, through their sacrifices, to "seize beforehand [*prolambanein*]" the gods' goodwill just as they learned as children to "steal [*kleptein*]" something to alleviate their hunger (Strauss encourages us to compare 13.3 with 2.7). The Spartans' understanding of the noble, it appears, is fundamentally self-contradictory: the sacrifices they make in an effort to appear worthy of the gods' aid are, in truth, nothing but a deviation from what should be understood as noble for the sake of their own advantage.

3 The Meaning of Lycurgus' Authority

As we have seen, the place of the missing speeches about the noble is taken by the rich men's act of buying their way out of the noble activity of hunting, that is, by a silent or implicit critique of nobility. Now, their very act of becoming rich suggests a flaw in Lycurgus' basic teaching of obedience to authority. Accordingly, Xenophon next turns to an examination of how authority was constituted at Sparta and in what it consists. We here learn that Lycurgus did not attempt to introduce discipline until he had first secured "like-mindedness" among the best (or strongest) men in the city (8.1). Now, like-mindedness is a highly ambiguous term. For, as the case of the proverbial band of robbers reveals, a group can be "like-minded" about base ends no less than noble ones. Obedience to rulers, as well as like-mindedness within the ruling class, is a virtue only insofar as those rulers understand and properly enact wise laws (517–18). And, as we have seen, Xenophon raises doubts about the wisdom of many of Lycurgus' laws. But Strauss here raises an important possible objection. Did not Xenophon's Socrates teach that obedience as such, obedience to any laws, is identical to justice (*Memorabilia* 4.4.15)? And, we might add, did not Xenophon leave ambiguous at the very start of his treatise whether the Spartans owed their happiness to the quality or wisdom of Lycurgus' laws—or merely to their obedience to them (1.2)? Strauss responds to this objection with

in order to have the people abide by laws prior to their having been formed by them (*Social Contract*, 2.7).

a digression explaining Xenophon's purpose and procedure in the *Memorabilia*. After noting that its purpose was to reveal only Socrates' speeches and deeds (and not his thoughts), Strauss goes on to suggest that Socrates' stated thesis about obedience to (any) law was, at best, a political teaching and not a philosophical one. Moreover, he demonstrates, Socrates himself includes in his discussion of obedience the relevant information that would enable his interlocutor to refute that thesis: there exist "natural" or "unwritten" laws that function as standards by which to judge (and to find wanting) any existing, written laws.

In what way, then, were the leading citizens "like-minded"? Xenophon explains they were not only of one mind with one another, they were like (in their fear of authority) the rest of the Spartans. Whom, then, did they fear? It is at this point in the discussion that Xenophon quietly introduces the office of the Ephors (8.3) who turn out to be the hidden rulers of Sparta. For the Ephors have more or less unlimited authority—they can even fine or imprison the magistrates, meaning that they (and they alone) are superior to the laws in Sparta. They behave, says Xenophon, like "tyrants" (8.4). The so-called wisdom of the Spartan laws, then, amounts to nothing more than a recognition that those laws are so inadequate to their task (of training citizens to prefer the city to themselves) that they must be supplemented with a tyrannical admixture of fear and shame. And finally, we should resist the all-too-natural conclusion that "like-mindedness" among the citizens is tantamount to "unity" or "harmony" among them. For insofar as they are like-minded about Lycurgus' teachings (e.g., that "stealing is good," that wealth enables one to escape from some of the onerous demands of nobility, that surviving until old age brings honor), the Spartan citizens are in fact prone to be in an endless contest with one another. There is, we learn, rampant dissension, rivalry, and even spying on one another. As Strauss observes, the classics taught that "one cannot assert that war against other cities is the aim of the life of the city without being driven to assert that war of individual against individual is the aim of the life of the individual" (524–25).

Xenophon concludes the section on Lycurgus' institutions (chapters 1–10) with the summary praise of Lycurgus for laying an "irresistible necessity to practice the whole of political virtue" on the citizens (10.7). This praise, we can now see, is less enthusiastic than it may at first seem. For not only is "public virtue" (i.e., the virtue that one practices in public and for the sake of the public; 10.4) a rather poor cousin to genuine virtue, but it is hard to see what virtue—other than obedience—can arise as a result of compulsion.⁸ Moreover, the

8 For a similar critique of "political virtue," see Plato, *Republic* 430c.

irresistible necessity is apparently not utterly irresistible: Xenophon immediately goes on to speak of the different fates of those who comply with it and those who do not. And while those who do not comply are made unhappy, those who do are merely given an equal share (with the others who do). It should come as no surprise that, while all “praise” such institutions, no city chooses to imitate them (10.8).

Strauss, in his concluding remarks on this section, focuses on the identity of the “leading citizens” and of “Lycurgus” himself. Not only, as we have already noted, do the Ephors secretly rule (and rule like tyrants), but there were apparently various “like-minded” powerful men from the city who accompanied Lycurgus on his trip to Delphi. Who, Strauss asks, were these men? It seems, he suggests, that they were the group that became the Ephors. And it is not clear how or to what extent Lycurgus can be distinguished from this group. Lycurgus, Strauss finally proposes, “did not exist at all”: he was a “mere name covering something much less solemn than an almost divine lawgiver belonging to a remote and venerable past” (527). (Strauss finds further textual proof of this at 13.10, where, according to the un-amended good manuscripts, “the Lycurgus with regard to [pitching the tents] is the king.” “‘Lycurgus’ is, then, a name designating authority or the men in authority”; 527.) Finally, Strauss indicates that Xenophon leaves it to the reader to conclude that the Ephors themselves either are or are in the sway of the wealthy Spartan few. This would-be aristocracy of virtue turns out to be a hypocritical or hidden oligarchy.

The second section, on war (chapters 11–13), follows. In this section, Xenophon tries to make the case that the Spartans “have omitted least what is necessary in military things” (12.7). Of course, this silently implies that they may have omitted quite a lot of what is necessary in the nonmilitary things. Furthermore, in noting the extraordinary power of the Ephors to oversee the others (even the king), Xenophon suggests “only the Lacedaemonians possessed the art of war” (13.5). Now, despite giving a relatively detailed account of how the Lacedaemonians prepare for war, Xenophon offers not a word on any successful, heroic, or noble military deeds by any Spartans (and this despite their recent victory in the Peloponnesian War). Readers of Thucydides will not be so surprised by this, insofar as he relates very few distinguished Spartan actions in that war (Brasidas, the least characteristic Spartan, being the sole exception), and suggests that, to no small degree, Athens defeated herself.

The final section, on the Spartan institution of kingship, is surprising for several reasons. First, we discover that there are two kings, not one. Second, and more important, it is here (in chapter 14) that Xenophon unleashes his harsh criticism of present-day Sparta, thereby ruining the effect, carefully nurtured from the beginning, of an impassioned praise of Sparta. Regarding the kings,

we learn that they are not quite the true power in Sparta—they remain subordinate to the Ephors. Moreover, the Spartan constitution itself "incentivizes" the kings to go to war: while they have "power and honor" in wartime, they have only "honor" in peacetime (cf. 13.1 and 15.8).

Strauss ends with a consideration of why Xenophon would hide his criticism of Sparta—and why he would hide it somewhat ineptly. First, an open criticism of Sparta would easily be mistaken for praise of Athens—and this, Strauss notes, is something that Xenophon, in the aftermath of Socrates having been put to death by Athens, would be hesitant to do. More than the particular praise of Athens that he wishes to withhold, however, Xenophon does not wish to praise any other political system in comparison with Sparta. For, in the final analysis, Xenophon wishes to critique political life *tout court* from the point of view of the contemplative life. And this means that, beneath his hidden critique or satire of Spartan "education" lies a still more hidden defense or promotion of true, philosophic education. Now, as we recall from the start, this apparently antiquarian essay is, in fact, of no little relevance for the age in which Strauss wrote it. For enlightenment liberalism as well as its contemporary political enemies thwart the "natural" taste for "big ideas" or philosophy. Moreover, his later reputation notwithstanding, Strauss clearly taught that war must be for the sake of peace and not vice versa. Would not the times then call for an open account of Xenophon's philosophic teaching? Strauss, of course, does not address or even raise this question. But he is clearly no fool. Germany was in no mood—not even its leading philosopher was in the mood—to hear about the primacy of the contemplative life over the life of war and deadly decision-making. And England and America needed at this time to hear, not of the ultimately superior value of peacetime, but of the grim necessity of fighting the given war that was about to be foisted on them.

What Strauss does see fit to share with his readers are a few brief comments about the character of a philosophic education. Such education is premised on the understanding that man does not belong "entirely" to the city.⁹ This was, to repeat, a somewhat controversial if not fantastic assertion to make in 1939. For it was denied not only by the various illiberal politics of the day, but by the leading philosophical school of the day, namely historicism. Man, it taught, was wholly a creature of his society, of his times, of the (temporary) world-view whose creature he inevitably had to be. Even at the end of the twentieth century, leading American postmodernist Richard Rorty could still assert man is

9 Consider Strauss (1953) 5: "there is something in man that is not altogether in slavery to his society."

“socialized all the way down.”¹⁰ Twentieth-century man, Strauss implied, needs to begin to relearn, in an almost humble fashion, the elementary truths about human nature, insofar as his understanding of such truths is “directly opposite to . . . what is” (11.5). And, because the authors most conversant with those truths insisted on writing esoterically, he needs to relearn how to read such literature. I close by simply quoting Strauss’ wonderful tribute to Xenophon’s own peculiar type of esotericism:

[S]uch a man was he that he preferred to go through the centuries in the disguise of a beggar rather than sell the precious secrets of Socrates’ quiet and sober wisdom to a multitude which let him escape to immortality only after he had intoxicated it by his artful stories of the swift and dazzling actions of an Agesilaus or a Cyrus, or a Xenophon. (536)

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10 Rorty (1989) 185.

A Guide to the Study of Leo Strauss' *On Tyranny*

Eric Buzzetti

Leo Strauss' *On Tyranny* (1948) is his first book length interpretation of a classical text. It is also among his most important works on Xenophon. More extensive and far-reaching a study than his essay "The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon" (1939), it is easier of access than his last two books on the same author, *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse* (1970) and *Xenophon's Socrates* (1972). And unlike his paper on "Xenophon's *Anabasis*" or the lectures on "The Origins of Political Science and the Problem of Socrates," Strauss published *On Tyranny* in his lifetime. *On Tyranny* is also among his most famous works because of the public debate it gave rise to with the great Marxist Hegelian Alexandre Kojève over the relative merits of ancient and modern philosophy. Yet despite the importance and the fame of the study, a purchaser of *On Tyranny* on its publication in 1948 could be forgiven for complaining of false advertising. In the late 1940s the United States and the western democracies were just coming out of World War II. The Nazi tyranny had been defeated. The end of fascism had marked the coming of age of a new and (in some respects) an even more oppressive form of tyranny in the Soviet Union. Strauss could have focused his study of tyranny on these grim political episodes and political developments. Instead, he is largely silent about them. He does speak at the beginning of his book of "the horrors of the twentieth century" and of the failure of modern political science to recognize "a kind of tyranny that surpassed the boldest imagination of the most powerful thinkers of the past" (23).¹ But though he goes on to warn his readers that "[w]e are now brought face to face with a tyranny which holds out the threat of becoming . . . what no earlier tyranny ever became: perpetual and universal" (27), he does not devote any analysis, in the book itself, to the regimes of Joseph Stalin or Adolf Hitler, two names that do not occur even a single time in the original study (as distinguished from the "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*," i.e., Strauss' reply to Kojève: cf. 186, 188–9; hereinafter the "Restatement"). We need only compare *On Tyranny* with a book that could appear to treat a closely related subject—*The Origins of*

1 Unless otherwise indicated, the page numbers in parentheses refer to Strauss (2000). I would like to thank Wayne Ambler, Robert C. Bartlett, Timothy W. Burns, Dustin Sebell and Devin Stauffer for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

Totalitarianism, by Hannah Arendt—to be struck by the singularity of Strauss' work.²

That singularity is evident in the choice of epigraph. Strauss places his study of tyranny under a pair of quotations from the Whig historian Thomas Babington Macaulay. It is well-known that Macaulay's *History of England* extols the Glorious Revolution (1688–1689) and the reign of William of Orange, who ruled England as William III.³ Inasmuch as that revolution is celebrated for having secured the political and the religious freedoms of the English against the tyranny of James II, Strauss' choice of epigraph would appear to be appropriate or, at least, intelligible. Yet Strauss does not quote from the *History of England* to highlight the tyrannical character of the rule of James II. He reproduces instead two passages in which Macaulay discusses the impact on English society of the repeal (or the non-renewal) of the Licensing Act, a legislation that provided the legal framework for the censorship of the press in the 17th century. Before the repeal, writing against the government was done rarely (according to Macaulay) and only by shady characters who were willing to engage in illegal activities. The repeal of the law meant that “[t]he best and wisest men in the ranks of the opposition now assumed an office which had hitherto been abandoned to the unprincipled or the hot-headed” (485).⁴ Macaulay thus writes as a champion of the repeal of the Licensing Act—a “great experiment” and a “great revolution” which produced, he says, “a great and salutary change” (481, 485). Strauss could appear to join Macaulay in celebrating the repeal of the Licensing Act insofar as he quotes the latter's statement (concerning the deleterious effect on the character of “the unprincipled or the hot-headed” who were attacking the government) that

[t]he habit of writing against the government had, of itself, an unfavorable effect on the character. For whoever was in the habit of writing

2 The horrors of the 20th century prompt Hannah Arendt to call for “a new political principle . . . a new law on earth” which will provide a “new guarantee” for “human dignity” (1958, ix). Living through the same historical experiences, and almost at the same time, Strauss writes a study that articulates the “tyrannical” teaching of Xenophon. In his introduction, Strauss expresses the wish that his study of tyranny will help combat the view that “all human thought is collective independently of any human effort directed to this end, because all human thought is historical” (27). He himself provides an extraordinary illustration of the falsity of the historicist premise or contention.—Hannah Arendt was made aware of the publication in French of Strauss' study, almost immediately, by a letter from Alexandre Koyré dated April 17, 1954. See Patard (2008) p. 23 n. 79.

3 See 182 for Strauss' view of William III.

4 Macaulay (1856), volume 4.

against the government was in the habit of breaking the law; and the habit of breaking even an unreasonable law tends to make men altogether lawless . . .

That Strauss sees a connection between character and law is, I think, undeniable. This connection is a theme of *On Tyranny*. To that extent, he can be said to agree with Macaulay. Yet it is striking that he does not quote any of the celebratory language used by Macaulay in reference to the repeal of the Licensing Act. In fact, taken out of its original context and printed by itself (as Strauss prints it), the quoted passage appears to imply a critique of political arrangements, favored by Macaulay, that permit or encourage "the habit of writing against the government" (but cf. 194). That Strauss does not share the favorable perspective of Macaulay on the repeal of the Licensing Act is made evident by the second passage he quotes, where Macaulay makes the almost unwitting admission that the freeing of the English press from legal restrictions had a deeply negative consequence as well, even from his own point of view: it produced a kind of enslavement of the English mind:

From the day on which the emancipation of our literature was accomplished, the purification of our literature began. . . . During a hundred and sixty years the liberty of our press has been constantly becoming more and more entire; and during those hundred and sixty years the restraint imposed on writers by the general feeling of readers has been constantly becoming more and more strict . . . At this day foreigners, who dare not print a word reflecting on the government under which they live, are at a loss to understand how it happens that the freest press in Europe is the most prudish. (22)

Macaulay indicates (in a passage not quoted by Strauss) that such philosophic poems as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* (in a partial translation by Dryden) had been allowed to be published under the old regime of censorship. But philosophic or otherwise unconventional works were no longer so readily published under the new regime of freedom: the very *wish* to publish such works was steadily waning: "At length even that class of works in which it was formerly thought that a voluptuous imagination was privileged to disport itself, love songs, comedies, novels, have become more decorous than the sermons of the seventeenth century" (485). It is no accident, I think, that Strauss places at the beginning of his study of tyranny a passage from a liberal and progressive historian who calls attention, almost unwittingly, to the problematic relation of thought, or intellectual virtue, to the law.

For when he writes that he seeks with *On Tyranny* to “reconsider . . . the elementary and unobtrusive conditions of human freedom,” Strauss means above all the conditions of *intellectual* freedom (27).⁵ Stated differently, the epigraph of *On Tyranny* is meant to elicit the thought, or to suggest, that modern liberal arrangements which grant freedom of criticism of the government (and of the law) as a matter of principle also tend to produce—paradoxically—an enslavement of the mind. In the span of an essay, it is impossible to develop an adequate interpretation of Leo Strauss’ extraordinary study of Xenophon’s *Hiero*. But I will endeavour to prepare the way for such an interpretation by showing that it is the theme of law—and, specifically, the theme of the relation of law to character or moral virtue, on one hand, and, above all, the relation of law to intellectual virtue, on the other—that constitutes the unifying thread of *On Tyranny*. Strauss’ analysis of law (understood in the broadest sense) is the key to his intention.

1 On the “Introduction”

“It is proper” (Strauss begins) “that I should indicate my reasons for submitting this detailed analysis of a forgotten dialogue on tyranny to the consideration of political scientists” (22). Since “[t]yranny is a danger coeval with political life” (he continues) “[t]he analysis of tyranny is . . . as old as political science itself” (22). Moreover, “[t]he analysis of tyranny that was made by the first political scientists was so clear, so comprehensive, and so unforgettably expressed that it was remembered and understood by generations which did not have any direct experience of actual tyranny” (22–23). In an apparent quest for clarity about the modern predicament—and given “the renewed general interest in authentic interpretation of the phenomenon of tyranny”—Strauss turns to a study of Xenophon’s *Hiero*, “the only writing of the classical period which is explicitly devoted to the discussion of tyranny and its implications, and to nothing else, and which has never been subjected to comprehensive analysis” (23).

Strauss acknowledges at the outset that there is “an essential difference” between the tyranny analyzed by the classics and present-day tyranny (23; see

5 “Confronted by the appalling alternative that man, or human thought, must be collectivized either by one stroke and without mercy [under communism] or else by slow and gentle processes [under liberalism], we are forced to wonder how we could escape from this dilemma” (27).

also 177). For “present-day tyranny has at its disposal ‘technology’ as well as ‘ideologies’; more generally expressed, it presupposes the existence of ‘science,’ i.e., of a particular interpretation, or kind, of science” (23). By contrast, classical tyranny “was *confronted* . . . by a science which was not meant to be applied to ‘the conquest of nature’ or to be popularized and diffused” (23, my emphasis). In other words, modern tyranny presupposes a recasting of the relation between science and tyranny where science becomes, not an opponent (actual or potential) of tyranny but something like a handmaid to it. And to understand this recasting—and, therewith, the specific character of modern tyranny—requires that we grasp how their relation was originally conceived of by the classics. For the “basic stratum of modern tyranny remains, for all practical purposes, unintelligible to us if we do not have recourse to the political science of the classics” (23).

Strauss outlines a second (related) goal for his study of tyranny beyond achieving an “authentic interpretation” of it (23). He aims to prepare an effort “to bring to light the deepest roots of modern political thought” (24). In his view, the failure of modern political science to recognize modern tyranny for what it is stems from a mistaken belief that “‘value judgments’ are inadmissible in scientific considerations” (23). And this belief or this basic premise is something of an inheritance from Machiavelli, to whom modern political science often traces its origin (with some truth). Yet “[o]ne cannot understand the meaning of Machiavelli’s achievement”—“the meaning of the epoch-making change [he] effected”—“if one does not confront his teaching with the traditional teaching he rejects” (24). Thus Strauss turns to Xenophon to articulate the traditional teaching with the aim of eventually illuminating where Machiavelli parts ways with it (cf. 56, 64). But at this point a question arises in the mind of the reader: precisely if we seek to pursue the second goal just outlined, why not turn to Xenophon’s longest work, the *Education of Cyrus*, instead of the *Hiero*? Strauss himself emphasizes that to study Machiavelli’s *Prince* in particular, it is necessary “to confront its teaching with that of the traditional mirrors of princes” and “concentrate on the only mirror of princes to which [Machiavelli] emphatically refers” (24). But this mirror of princes is the *Education of Cyrus*, as Strauss acknowledges. Besides, the *Education of Cyrus* addresses the theme of tyranny (e.g. 1.3.18, 8.2.10–12) and the relation between science (or philosophy) and tyrannical or political power (e.g. 1.6.27–34, 3.1.38–40). Finally, Strauss had studied the *Education of Cyrus* extensively by the time he published *On Tyranny* (cf. 180–82). Why, then, did he choose to write an entire book on the smallish and “forgotten dialogue” *Hiero* instead of “the classic and the fountainhead of [the] whole genre” of mirror of princes—the *Education of Cyrus* (22, 24)?

To begin with, Strauss' decision to privilege the *Hiero* can be explained by two reasons, only the first one of which is stated explicitly by him. The teaching transmitted through the *Hiero* comes (Strauss says) "as near to the teaching of the *Prince* as the teaching of any Socratic could possibly come" (24). Hence, by confronting the teaching of these two works "one can grasp most clearly the subtlest and indeed the decisive difference between Socratic political science and Machiavellian political science" (24). In other words, the study of the *Hiero* is indeed "very useful, not to say indispensable" with a view to the above goal of illuminating the origins of modern political thought (24). But it is the second reason—which is not stated explicitly by Strauss, as I said, but which I believe does motivate him—that is perhaps more important here. The opening line of *On Tyranny* suggests that Strauss is writing primarily for an audience of political scientists (22). But Strauss soon indicates that his primary addressees are in fact the young. At any rate, he emphasizes in the closing line of his introduction his abiding concern for the proper education or training of youth (28). I believe that in (or with) *On Tyranny*, Strauss takes Socrates as his pedagogical model. He does something very similar to what the philosopher is shown to do in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. According to that text, Socrates presented himself to potential pupils as a teacher of the so-called kingly virtue or kingly art, the virtue or art of ruling with knowledge (*Memorabilia* 4.2.11 and context). He approached the young by appealing to their wish to learn this virtue or art in order to become good citizens (*Memorabilia* 4.2.11). Addressing their high-minded political concerns, he aimed to lead the young beyond those concerns or to purify them. For the ultimate goal of the Socratic education was trans-political: Socrates aimed to bring about a conversion of the soul to philosophy. I believe that Strauss has the same goal in mind in *On Tyranny*, and that he uses a kindred method to attain it. He presents himself as a knower of the political pathology of tyranny, a critic of the moral obtuseness of modern political science, as well as an expert guide to "Plato and other classical thinkers [who] seemed to have interpreted for us the horrors of the twentieth century" (23).⁶ Strauss is trying to appeal to the renewed general interest in the subject of tyranny to introduce promising youths to philosophy. For that

6 As evidence for my contention, consider Strauss' request that the reader "[c]ompare *Memorabilia* IV 2.23–24 with *ibid.* 16–17" (107 n. 5 [top of the page]). The two passages from the *Memorabilia* that we are asked to compare pertain to the Socratic education. The central example given by Socrates in the second passage (*Memorabilia* IV 2.16–17) suggests that it is just for someone whose son needs medicine but will not allow it near him, to use deception and give him the medicine as food, using the lie to make him healthy. The first passage (*Memorabilia* IV 2.23–24) illuminates what "health" means in that context (= self-knowledge).

interest was bound to be especially strong among the good natures. These would-be high-minded and talented youths typically were attracted to political science but had been (in the late 1940s) “disappointed or repelled by [morally obtuse] present-day analyses of present-day tyranny” (23).⁷ To state the same point differently, Strauss chooses to write on the *Hiero* because an interpretation of the *Education of Cyrus*—a book that deals with kingship, not tyranny⁸—would not have had the same resonance or appeal as a book titled *On Tyranny* in the late 1940s. That there is more to Strauss’ decision to privilege the *Hiero* over the *Education of Cyus* will, I hope, become clear in this essay. But we must never lose sight of the audience primarily sought by Strauss for his work.

In the second half of the introduction, Strauss asserts that Xenophon as an author employs Socratic rhetoric. We are not surprised or entirely unprepared to learn that the function of Socratic rhetoric is “to lead potential philosophers to philosophy both by training them and by liberating them from the charms which obstruct the philosophic effort, as well as to prevent the access to philosophy of those who are not fit for it” (27, my emphasis). Socratic rhetoric is “emphatically just” (Strauss insists) and is “animated by the spirit of social responsibility” (27). This rhetoric is “based on the premise that there is a disproportion between the intransigent quest for truth and the requirements of society, or that not all truths are always harmless” (27). Strauss also stresses that “[s]ociety will *always* try to tyrannize thought,” and that “Socratic rhetoric is the classic means for *ever again* frustrating these attempts” (27, my emphasis). In other words, we are given grounds to expect that Strauss himself will prove to be a practitioner of Socratic rhetoric (cf. 47–48 and, especially, 76). For the two statements just quoted are meant to be applied to *all* societies—past, present and future—not just illiberal ones. Already in his introduction, Strauss acknowledges that his interpretation of the *Hiero* has “not dotted all the *i*’s,” and he asks for the patience of the reader (28). He has had to engage, he says, in “long-winded and sometimes repetitious considerations, which can arrest attention only if one sees their purpose, and it is necessary that this purpose should reveal itself in its proper place, which cannot be at the beginning” (28).

As for the meaning of “son” (and “father”), see Buzzetti (2014) pp. 117–8 (and n. 23), 121–2, 292–3. In *On Tyranny*, Strauss is playing the “father.”

7 For Socrates’s view of what a good nature is, see *Memorabilia* 4.1.2. See also the “Restatement,” 200–3, 204.

8 “The *Education of Cyrus* may be said to be devoted to the perfect king in contradistinction to the tyrant” (24). Cf. 182.

2 On "The Problem"

"The Problem" discussed in the first of the numbered sections of *On Tyranny* is that "[t]he intention of the *Hiero* is nowhere stated by the author" (29). For Xenophon says nothing in his own name, so to speak, in the dialogue he authors between the poet Simonides and the tyrant Hiero. If we glance at the content of the dialogue, we are liable to conclude that it is intended as praise of the life of the beneficent tyrant, a life that "is superior, in the most important respect, to private life" (29). If we can assume that the *Hiero* is addressed to actual tyrants, it may therefore be that the intention of the work is "to exhort [tyrants] to exercise their rule in a spirit of shrewd benevolence" (29). "Yet" (Strauss objects to himself) "only a very small part of [the] readers [of the *Hiero*] can be supposed to be actual tyrants" (29). We may then have to take the *Hiero* as a whole to be "a recommendation addressed to properly equipped young men who are pondering what way of life they should choose—a recommendation to strive for tyrannical power, not indeed to gratify their desires, but to gain the love and admiration of all men by deeds of benevolence on the greatest possible scale" (30). From here, it seems to follow that Strauss' *On Tyranny* is intended to make Xenophon's recommendation accessible to a new generation of readers—to exhort young men to become beneficent tyrants: "Socrates, the teacher of Xenophon, was suspected of teaching his companions to be 'tyrannical': Xenophon lays himself open to the same suspicion" (30). Strauss too, it seems, must be put on our list of suspects.

Yet no sooner has he made the suggestion that the *Hiero* is a recommendation to strive for beneficent tyrannical power than Strauss withdraws that suggestion, and in a manner that will prove to be definitive: "it is not Xenophon but Simonides who proves that a beneficent tyrant will reach the summit of happiness, and one cannot identify without further consideration the author's views with those of one of his characters" (30). Besides, "even if we assume that Simonides is simply the mouthpiece of Xenophon, great difficulties remain, for Simonides' thesis is ambiguous" (30). It is ambiguous because it serves "the purpose of comforting [a] sad tyrant, and does not the intention to comfort detract from the sincerity of a speech?" (30). What is more, "[i]s any speech addressed to a tyrant by a man who is in the tyrant's power likely to be a sincere speech?" (30). Yet while Strauss thus withdraws the suggestion that the *Hiero* is a recommendation to strive for beneficent tyrannical power, at no point does he withdraw his underlying suggestion that the dialogue is addressed to properly equipped young men who are pondering what way of life they should choose. Could it be that the *Hiero* is (in his view) somehow a meditation on the best life? And we might surmise, furthermore, that Strauss intends to make

that meditation accessible to a new generation of readers in and through his interpretation.⁹ In other words, Strauss is no more a teacher of tyranny than were either Socrates or Xenophon. Accordingly, when Strauss alludes to the “tyrannical” teaching of Socrates in the present context, he places the word “tyrannical” in quotation marks (30). It is only with a degree of license that we are allowed to speak of Socrates as a teacher of “tyranny.” Yet the very fact that Strauss keeps speaking of “the ‘tyrannical’ teaching” of Socrates (or of Xenophon) suggests that the phrase is somehow not altogether inappropriate (34, 35, 43, 66–67, 76, 99). In what sense is it accurate or legitimate?

3 On “The Title and the Form”

To clarify the intention of the *Hiero* is a difficult task because Xenophon says almost nothing in his own name in the dialogue. Yet “Xenophon himself takes full responsibility for the title of the work” (31). In the second numbered section, Strauss analyzes the complete title—Ἱέρων ἢ Τυραννικός—as well as the dialogical form of the *Hiero*. His goal appears to be to shed further light on Xenophon’s intention. This is our initial expectation, at any rate. Yet we soon notice that the word “intention” is not actually used by Strauss in section 11.¹⁰ Instead, he speaks repeatedly of the “purpose” of the *Hiero*. (The word “purpose” occurs six times [including in the notes] in the first three paragraphs, where Strauss discusses the title; he does not use the word “purpose” in reference to the [dialogical] form.) After noting that the first part of the title of the *Hiero* is reminiscent of the title of the *Agesilaus*—both works “may be said to be devoted to Greek rulers”—Strauss notes that the second part (Τυραννικός, meaning “the skilled tyrant”) “reminds one of the titles of the *Hipparchicus*, the *Oeconomicus*, and the *Cynegeticus*” (31). These three writings serve the purpose of teaching skills, and, specifically, “skills befitting gentlemen” (31). “Accordingly, one should expect that the purpose of the *Tyrannicus* is to teach the skill of the tyrant, the σοφία (or τέχνη) τυραννική; and in fact Simonides does therein teach Hiero how best to exercise tyrannical rule” (31). Yet of course, the specific skill

9 Consider note 39 on 86. In the note itself (located on 124), Strauss refers the reader back to 22–23, i.e., to his “reasons for submitting this detailed analysis of a forgotten dialogue.” Strauss apparently intends to help properly equipped young men become competent at choosing the best life, presumably by “liberating them from the charms which obstruct the philosophic effort” (27 cf. 196–205).

10 The word “intention” is used four times in the span of 47 lines in section 1. It is the opening word (save for the definite article) of the first two paragraphs of the study proper.

being taught in the *Hiero* is *not* a skill “befitting gentlemen.” Strauss softens the potential implications of this (unstated) major difference between the *Hiero* and the other three writings by calling attention to a parallel between our dialogue and the Πόροι ἢ περὶ προσόδων (*Ways and Means*), the only other work of Xenophon with an alternative title. The purpose of the *Ways and Means* is “to show the (democratic) rulers of Athens how they could become more just by showing them how they could overcome the necessity under which they found themselves of acting unjustly” (31–2). Likewise, “Simonides shows the tyrannical ruler of Syracuse how he could overcome the necessity of acting unjustly under which he found himself without abandoning tyrannical rule as such” (32). The *Ways and Means* and the *Hiero* are thus “the only works of Xenophon which are devoted to the question of how a given political order (πολιτεία) of a faulty character could be corrected without being transformed into a good political order” (32). The title of the *Hiero*, in other words, points toward its purpose (as distinguished from its intention): to convey Xenophon’s “reflections on the improvement of tyrannical rule” (32 cf., however, 79).

At the beginning of the discussion of the form of the *Hiero*, Strauss argues that Xenophon chose to present his thoughts on the improvement of tyranny dialogically (and not “in direct terms,” as he did in the *Ways and Means*) because he did not want to convey “the impression that he was not absolutely opposed to tyranny” (32). For “[t]he cities,” and especially Athens, were absolutely opposed to tyranny” (32). Indeed, to explain how to improve tyranny is also, inescapably, to explain how to stabilize such rule. The dialogical form thus enables Xenophon to “hid[e] himself” almost completely” (32). Nor did Xenophon wish to write a dialogue in which he would assign the “tyrannical” teaching to Socrates: “Nothing would have been easier” than for him to show Socrates discussing “how to rule well as a tyrant” with an actual or potential tyrant (of whom there were several in his circle); but by doing this, “he would have destroyed the basis of his own defense of Socrates” (33). Xenophon therefore chose another wise man as the interlocutor of the tyrant Hiero. Yet Strauss makes clear that apologetic reasons of this sort are insufficient to account for the dialogical form of the work. After observing the parallelism of form between the *Hiero* and the *Oeconomicus*—only these two works of Xenophon consist “almost exclusively of utterances of men other than the author” (32)—he points out that the *Oeconomicus* deals with a highly respectable and even a lofty subject: not just the economic art but “the royal art as such” (33). But the royal art is respectable; it is “morally superior to the tyrannical art” (33). There would appear to be no reason—or, at any rate, less of a reason—for Xenophon to “hide himself” when discussing this art. But since he *does* “hide himself” when he discusses the art in the *Oeconomicus*, the reason for the dialogical

form of the *Hiero* is not likely to be exhausted by Xenophon's concerns over matters of apology.

What other reason(s) is (are) there, then, for the dialogical form of the *Hiero* (and of the *Oeconomicus*)? Here Strauss is content to offer a laconic explanation. He "venture[s] to say" that "the subjects of the [*Hiero* and the *Oeconomicus*] are of a higher order, or are more philosophic than those of [the *Hipparchicus* and the *Cynegeticus*], the other works in which Xenophon teaches arts or skills (34).¹¹ "Accordingly, their treatment too should be more philosophic," for "[f]rom Xenophon's point of view, philosophic treatment is conversational treatment" (34). However, Strauss does not indicate unambiguously what he takes to be the "subject" of the *Hiero* and the *Oeconomicus*. Is the subject in question the "skill of ruling," as he appears to say—or (since Strauss puts the word "subject" in the plural), the "tyrannical art," on one hand, and the "royal art," on the other (34)? But if this is what Strauss means, in what sense are these two subjects "higher or more philosophic" than, say, the skill of ruling as a cavalry-commander (taught *non-dialogically* in the *Hipparchicus*)? Perhaps it will not be amiss if I glance at Strauss' later interpretation of the *Oeconomicus* (1970). There Strauss argues that the subject of that dialogue is the gentleman as such—that is, "perfect gentlemanliness."¹² If we accept this interpretation here—an interpretation supported by the text of the *Oeconomicus* (6.12–17)—and keeping in mind that the gentleman might be said to be *the* opponent of the tyrant, the subject of the *Hiero* might have to be taken to be the *rejection* of the gentleman, or what the gentleman stands for (cf. 40, 92; also III n. 44).

What we can say confidently at this point is that when Strauss goes on to discuss the advantages of "[c]onversational teaching of the skill of ruling," he puts the stress less on ruling than on virtue (34). For, not only does conversational teaching, he says, "necessitat[e] the confrontation of a wise man (the teacher) and a ruler (the pupil)," but it also "compels the reader to wonder whether the lessons given by the wise man to the ruler bore fruit": that is, it compels us to wonder about the teachability of virtue (34). Secondly, conversational teaching leaves the reader wondering whether "experience offered a single instance of a tyrant who was happy because he was virtuous": we are made to wonder about the relation between virtue and happiness (34 cf. 59–60). Does this mean that the subjects of the *Hiero* and the *Oeconomicus* are "of a higher order, or are more philosophic," because these two dialogues treat virtue (i.e. gentlemanliness) and the rejection of it? If this should prove to be the case,

11 The special case of the Περὶ Ἱππικῆς ("On Horsemanship") is treated on 107 n. 2.

12 (1998a) 127–9, 131–2, 148, 157, 159–66, 167, 178, 185, 195, 200, 204–5, 209. See also the "Preface" to (1998b).

the confrontation between the wise man and the ruler depicted in each work would pertain to the status of virtue, and the intention of the *Hiero* (as distinguished from its purpose) would be to guide properly equipped young men in their choice of life by presenting them with an alternative at the heart of which is somehow a confrontation with respect to virtue.

When Strauss wonders why Xenophon chose Simonides as the chief character of the *Hiero* “in preference to certain other wise men who were known to have conversed with tyrants,” he stresses Simonides’s ambiguous moral character (33). Unlike Socrates, who teaches the morally (more) respectable royal or economic art in the *Oeconomicus*, and who has “perfect self-control as regards the pleasures deriving from wealth,” Simonides, who teaches the tyrannical art in the *Hiero*, “was famous for his greed” (33). Beyond this, Simonides (and not Socrates) stoops to present the “tyrannical” teaching in his own name. This second difference must be traced back to the fact that Simonides alone is interested in increasing his property: he is “an ‘economist’ ” (33). Yet while Strauss thus suggests that Simonides is *not* “a truly wise man,” he does describe him as “wise,” both here and throughout the book (35; e.g. 33, 34, 35, 37, 58–9, 67, 79, 113 n. 18, 124 n. 41; cf., however, 94 and, above all, 104–5). Moreover, Strauss indicates that Socrates and Xenophon both accept the “tyrannical” teaching as a true teaching, though neither man cares to present it in his own name. The “tyrannical” teaching is a “philosophic teaching” apparently accepted by the wise as such (35 cf. 76). But what exactly is the content of the “tyrannical” teaching? Strauss ends section II of *On Tyranny* with a programmatic statement that highlights the centrality of clarifying what this teaching is for his study as a whole: to “realize the place which [the ‘tyrannical’ teaching] occupies, according to the author, within the whole of wisdom,” he says, “requires more than an understanding of its content” (34). We must also “consider the [dialogical] form in which it is presented” (34). The dialogical form in which the “tyrannical” teaching is presented in the *Hiero* is the theme of the next section of *On Tyranny* (section III). From there, Strauss will proceed to articulate the content of that teaching, most conspicuously and in the first place in section IV, the central section of the book.¹³ Only in the seventh and final section of *On Tyranny* will Strauss adumbrate the place that the “tyrannical” teaching occupies “within the whole of wisdom.” In the intervening sections V–VI, Strauss will advance and in a sense complete his articulation of the content

13 That Strauss pays attention to “the center” in Xenophon is clear: 41, 43, 90, 110 n. 33. See also 87. There is little doubt that as an author, he employs the same literary technique. It is an aspect of his Socratic rhetoric. See the next paragraph as well as Strauss (1998b) 58 and Buzzetti (2014) 16–9.

of the “tyrannical” teaching, but he will do so unobtrusively, that is, in a manner attentive to the sensitive character of that teaching, as well as to his own pedagogic intention.

4 On “The Setting”

The third numbered section of *On Tyranny* is by far the longest of the study. It is also divided into three subsections—the only section to be subdivided. The section illustrates with special clarity the qualities of Strauss’ reading of Xenophon. And since it teaches us how to read a work by a practitioner of Socratic rhetoric, it would appear to bear directly on how we ourselves ought to read *On Tyranny*. Strauss is painstakingly attentive to the details of the *Hiero* and extraordinarily precise in his analysis. He takes the time to count words to determine, for example, how often certain characteristic terms are used. He seeks the authentic plan of the dialogue and of its two main parts (which are divided into four sections). He is attentive to what Xenophon places “at the center.” He considers when the characters Hiero or Simonides speak up or choose to remain silent, when they interrupt each other, when they swear, when they laugh or stay serious, etc. Especially significant for our purposes, Strauss teaches us the importance of comparing seemingly “repetitive” passages of the dialogue. He possesses an uncanny ability to bring out crucial differences in apparent “repetitions” in a way that illuminates the progress of the conversation or of the argument. As he himself writes in a later book on Xenophon: “In a good author who as such is not prolix, a repetition is never a mere repetition and very rarely a literal repetition; in a good author a repetition always teaches us something we could not have learned from the first statement.”¹⁴ Open to all possibilities of interpretation (including the unorthodox or the seemingly egregious)—as well as to the possible objections to these interpretations—Strauss always demands and provides textual evidence. The astonishing thoroughness of his analysis vindicates his epistolary quip to Kojève: “I am one of those who refuse to go through open doors when one can

14 Strauss (1998a) 125–26. This statement must be applied to Strauss himself. In this connection, consider 28 (on “repetitious considerations”). To give here three examples of Strauss’ “repetitions” in *On Tyranny* that are both characteristic and important: compare 99 with 76, especially how “theoretical” is used in each place; compare 91 (and 125 n. 59) with 74 on the issue of the superior justice of Socrates; finally, compare 87 with 77 on the relation between “precision” and the depiction of Socrates as a “citizen-philosopher.”

enter just as well through a keyhole.”¹⁵ Before he wrote *On Tyranny*, Strauss had mastered the Xenophonic corpus. An adequate interpretation of the book would show, I believe, that *On Tyranny* is so to speak a compendium of classical political philosophy, one written by a Socratic philosopher.

The first subsection of section III is titled “The Characters and Their *Intentions*” (36, my emphasis). As we recall, the word “intention” had not been used in section II, though we expected it to be used. Strauss all but opens section III with it. (Strauss will soon make clear that the word “intention” has, or can have, a moral meaning [60; see also 117 n. 65]; hence, the title of the first subsection is meant to cause us to wonder about the “good” or the “bad” intention of the two characters: that is, about their stance toward morality.) Strauss begins his analysis with Simonides. At first, he suggests that the poet is seeking a conversation with Hiero “with the intention of learning something” from him (37). Specifically, Simonides questions Hiero to learn “in what way the life of a tyrant and that of private men differ with regard to human enjoyments and pains” (37). And this question, according to Strauss, “is identical, in the context, with the question as to which of the two ways of life is more desirable” (37). Yet no sooner has Strauss suggested that Simonides is trying to learn something important from Hiero than he (once again) withdraws this suggestion: “The question as to whether, or how far, tyrannical life is more desirable than private life, and in particular whether, or how far, it is more desirable from the point of view of pleasure, is no longer a question for a man [like Simonides] who has acquired wisdom” (38). Strauss does not indicate, however, how Simonides has answered this question. Nor does he indicate what it means to have “acquired wisdom.” Hence if our earlier surmise was correct—that the intention of the *Hiero* (and Strauss’ intention in writing about it) is somehow to guide properly equipped young men in their choice of life—we must expect that these statements belong to a preliminary phase of the analysis. Strauss manifestly cannot leave it at asserting that Simonides has already answered the question of the best life because he is wise. For now, Strauss offers an alternative hypothesis regarding Simonides’s intention: since his conversation with Hiero “leads up to such suggestions about the improvement of tyrannical rule as a wise man could be expected to make to a tyrant toward whom he is well disposed[, w]e shall . . . assume that the wise Simonides opens the conversation intending to be of some benefit to Hiero, perhaps in order to be benefited in turn or to benefit the tyrant’s subjects” (38). Simonides’s intention would appear to be high-minded and even public-spirited, though the possibility that he intends to be benefited by the tyrant Hiero is not excluded.

15 Letter to Kojève of 22 August 1948, reproduced in Strauss (2000) 236.

To be able to teach Hiero how to rule well or better as a tyrant, Simonides must first show him that he is in need of such instruction. He must bring Hiero to recognize the difficulties and the shortcomings of his rule and of his life as a whole. He must humble or dishearten him. But Simonides must do so in a manner that will be as little offensive as possible to the tyrant. Simonides will reach this pedagogic goal in the first part of the *Hiero*, according to Strauss, by hiding or concealing his wisdom (chaps. 1–7). He will present himself as the pupil of Hiero and get *him* to explain the shortcomings of the tyrannical life. He will tempt Hiero—a man interested in superiority, including superiority in argument—to teach him that tyrannical life is *not*, in fact, more desirable than private life. This conversational tactic, however, in which Hiero is allowed to “vindicat[e] his superiority while demonstrating his inferiority,” presents a danger for Simonides (39). For by becoming for a moment the spokesman of the vulgar opinion that tyranny is “bad for the city but good for the tyrant,” Simonides creates the suspicion in the mind of Hiero that he is not himself a gentleman: that is, that he does not view tyranny as morally objectionable (40). And, if this suspicion does indeed arise in Hiero’s mind, “the theoretical and somewhat playful discussion [between the two men] will transform itself into a conflict” (40). Hiero will come to see Simonides as a rival not in wisdom but in rule.

According to Strauss, “[t]he tyrant’s fear of the wise is a specific one” (41). To be sure, the tyrant fears “the brave and the just” among his subjects “because their virtues or virtuous actions” might pose a threat to his rule, whereas he “does not clearly grasp the specific or positive character of wisdom” (41, 42). But Strauss soon makes it clear that the tyrant fears the wise for the precise reason that, he suspects, the wise are *not* virtuous or gentlemanly: Hiero is “disturbed by the suspicion that the wise man may be a potential tyrant, or a potential adviser of possible rivals of Hiero” (44 cf. 109 n. 24). Yet this suspicion is only an unproven possibility in his mind: Hiero “oscillates between two diametrically opposed views, between the vulgar view and the wise view of wisdom” (44). In the same context, Strauss argues (more generally) that the attitude of Hiero toward the wise “is characteristic not only of tyrants” but of political rulers more broadly, and indeed, of all who are not wise: “The distrust of the wise, which proceeds from lack of understanding of wisdom, is characteristic of the vulgar, of tyrants and nontyrants alike” (42). Strauss insists, however, that this near-universal distrust of wisdom is misplaced; it stems from a confusion of wisdom with mere sophistry: “whereas the sophist prostitutes wisdom for base purposes, and especially for money, the wise man makes the most noble or moral use of wisdom. The wise man is a gentleman, whereas the sophist is servile” (42). This is an attractive and powerful statement by Strauss. Its importance should not be underestimated. Still, almost in the same breath

with which he asserts this, Strauss acknowledges that the word “gentleman” has not one but two different meanings: “In common parlance, ‘gentleman’ designates a just and brave man, a good citizen, who as such is not necessarily a wise man. . . . In the Socratic meaning of the term, the gentleman is identical with the wise man” (42). In other words, the relation between wisdom and gentlemanliness in the common or ordinary sense of the word remains somewhat dark at this point in Strauss’ analysis.

The choice of topic for the conversation between Simonides and Hiero—the relative desirability of tyrannical and private life—was therefore bound to exacerbate what would have been in any case Hiero’s fear of the wise Simonides. And from here, we grasp the intention of Hiero in dealing with him: he seeks to dissuade Simonides from admiring or envying tyrants by stating as strongly as possible the case *against* tyranny: “Simonides’ intention to dishearten Hiero and Hiero’s intention to dissuade Simonides . . . produce by their cooperation the result primarily intended by Simonides, viz., a situation in which Hiero has no choice but to listen to Simonides’ advice” (45). According to Strauss, Simonides’s intention will lead him to overstate the case *for* tyranny in order to provoke Hiero into developing the most comprehensive indictment of tyranny he can. Indeed, Strauss proves (with textual evidence drawn primarily from the *Hellenica*) that Hiero overstates the case against tyranny even according to Xenophon himself (45–47). On this basis, Strauss will reach the conclusion that the indictment of tyranny in the *Hiero* has a twofold meaning. “According to its obvious meaning, it amounts to the strongest possible indictment of tyranny: . . . tyranny is bad even from the point of view of tyrants, even from the point of view of the pleasures of the tyrant” (47). But this indictment of tyranny by Hiero is based on “the gentleman’s image of the tyrant,” and this image is to be distinguished from “the true account of tyranny” (111 n. 44). A less obvious meaning of the indictment of tyranny comes to sight once we take into account not only the facts recorded in the *Hellenica* but also “the conversational setting of the *Hiero*” (47). When we do this, “a more qualified indictment of tyranny” or “a more truthful account” of it—“the wise view of tyranny”—comes to light (47). The next task for Strauss is therefore to consider Hiero’s “speeches” or indictment of tyranny “in the light of the more trustworthy ‘deeds’ or ‘actions’ or ‘facts,’ and in particular that most important of ‘facts,’ the conversational setting of the *Hiero*” (47). Strauss turns to this task in the central subsection of the third numbered section.

The title of the central subsection is “The Action of the Dialogue” (48). The title is not altogether unexpected given what we have just heard from Strauss about how to uncover the wise view of tyranny. It is nevertheless an odd title.

Strictly speaking, there is no "action" in the *Hiero*. Two men talk to each other. Nothing—or nothing else—"happens." Indeed, what Strauss offers in this subsection is a kind of summary of the entire dialogue. But it is a summary of speeches, not deeds. Why then did Strauss choose this odd title?

The oddity of the title is meant, I believe, to hint at the far-reaching significance of the subsection. It becomes gradually clear that Strauss' aim here is to illuminate not the action of the two characters but rather their *inaction*, i.e., their *failure* to act. For it is by their inaction that Simonides and Hiero are most importantly characterized conversationally (according to Strauss), and it is in and through their inaction that the wise view of tyranny begins to be brought to light by Xenophon.

Strauss begins once again with Simonides. He explains that the poet initially presents himself to Hiero as a man chiefly interested in "good living"—i.e. in bodily pleasures—to reassure Hiero that he poses no political threat. But as soon as Hiero has been sufficiently reassured and is committed to the continuation of the conversation, Simonides "intimates an unequivocal taste for tyranny" (52). By giving this turn to the conversation (at the beginning of chap. 2), Simonides causes alarm to Hiero and provokes him to "an eloquent indictment of tyranny which surpasses in scope everything said in the first section [i.e. in chap. 1]" (52–53). And this increase of tension is due not only to the declaration of the poet that bodily pleasures are irrelevant after all, but above all to "the ambiguous silence with which [Simonides] listens to Hiero's tirade" against tyranny (53). For Simonides remains pointedly silent even as Hiero highlights "the moral depravity" of the tyrant (55, 115 n. 31). By ignoring "the moral flaws deplored by Hiero," Simonides presents himself as a man who is "not at all impressed by the immorality, or the injustice, characteristic of the tyrannical life; certainly its inevitable immorality would not prevent him for a moment from aspiring to tyranny for the sake of honor" (55–6). Hence by revealing "a complete lack of scruple"—or what appears to be a complete lack of scruple—Simonides overwhelms Hiero and eventually causes him to hand over the leadership of the conversation (56). At the same time, he convinces Hiero of his competence to give advice to tyrants, for his very silence shows that he would be able to give unsentimental advice to an unsentimental ruler. In other words, the key "action" of Simonides in the second section (chaps. 2–6) of the dialogue is that he remains silent, or almost completely silent, throughout (cf. 53–4). He disregards "morality 'by deed'" instead of "attacking it 'by speech'" (56). This "action" of Simonides raises a delicate question, however: are wise men (as exemplified by Simonides) *not* gentlemen after all? Does the "action" of Simonides characterize him most importantly conversationally because it highlights wisdom's freedom from morality?

Strauss does not make this argument. On the contrary, he suggests that Simonides may be a gentleman even in the common or ordinary sense of the term: "Even a perfectly just man who wants to give advice to a tyrant has to present himself to his pupil as an utterly unscrupulous man" (56). The immorality of Simonides, feigned or otherwise, is in any case a necessary means to his becoming the educator of Hiero. Accordingly, the "chief pedagogic lesson" of Xenophon in the *Hiero* is that the teacher of tyrants must *appear* to be immoral (56). And in keeping with this lesson, Strauss speaks of the "*alleged* or real freedom" from morality of Simonides (56, 61, my emphasis). However, we note that Strauss leaves open the possibility that the freedom in question is real. He simply does not settle the question at this juncture.

Strauss treats the "action" of Hiero rather more briefly than the "action" of Simonides. But the brevity of his treatment belies the importance of what he thereby brings to light. Hiero's indictment of tyranny in the second (chaps. 2–6) and third (chap. 7) sections of the dialogue leads to a "veiled suggestion" by Simonides that Hiero should return to private life: "That suggestion is the necessary conclusion which a reasonable man would draw from Hiero's comparison between tyrannical and private life" (57). Now, Hiero defends himself against that suggestion by pointing out that a return to private life is not an option for him: he cannot make amends for his past crimes. He thereby might seem to reveal, according to Strauss, "some rudimentary sense of justice" (57). But (Strauss immediately adds) "[t]his defense [offered by Hiero] is manifestly hypocritical: if tyranny is what he has asserted it to be, he prefers heaping new crimes on the untold number of crimes which he has already committed rather than stop his criminal career and suffer the consequences of his former misdeeds" (57). Strauss raises an alternative possibility, however: could Hiero not escape punishment—the fear of which appears to be his "real motive for not abdicating"—by simply fleeing the city (57)? History is filled with examples of tyrants who lived quietly as expatriates after being expelled from their city, or after going into voluntary exile. That Hiero refuses to consider this alternative reveals, according to Strauss, that he is a man who is "unable to live as a stranger" (57). In this inability he differs essentially from the wandering poet Simonides: "It is this citizen spirit of [Hiero]—the fact that he cannot help being absolutely attached to his city—to which the wandering poet silently appeals when teaching him how to be a good ruler" (57). The decisive "action" of Hiero in the dialogue, in other words, is here once again a form of inaction: the tyrant does *not* move away from his city. Thus when Strauss writes that "Hiero has finally been rendered incapable of any further move" in and through his conversation with Simonides, the word "incapable" is meant in more ways than one (57). The "action" of Hiero reveals that a tyrant—even as

morally depraved a man as a tyrant—is somehow moved by “citizen spirit.” The importance of this insight—conveyed by the conversational setting of the dialogue—becomes clear once we observe that Strauss has linked good citizenship (or the spirit of good citizenship) to ordinary gentlemanliness (42).

That Simonides disregards morality “by deed” in the second and third sections of the dialogue is only one aspect of his “action” that Strauss wishes to call attention to. Strauss notes that “the vehemence of Hiero’s indictment” of tyranny “had been increasing from section to section because Simonides had not been deterred from praising tyranny by the shortcomings of tyranny pointed out by Hiero. Now, Hiero had spoken against tyranny in the third section [chap. 7] more violently than before, and in the fourth section [chaps. 8–11] Simonides continues praising tyranny” (58). Accordingly, we would expect that Hiero would “continue still increasing the vehemence of his indictment of tyranny. Yet he takes the opposite course” (58). Why? Strauss interprets this shift in the attitude of Hiero to reflect the fact that Simonides’s praise of (beneficent) tyranny in the fourth section “is not considered by Hiero an expression of the poet’s jealousy of tyrants” (58). But why not? The answer, according to Strauss, is as follows: when Simonides has Hiero on his knees, so to speak—when the despondent Hiero declares his “bankruptcy” and is seemingly ready to commit suicide (45)—Simonides refrains “from acting like a man who wants to do away with a tyrant, or to deprive him of his power” (59). Simply put, Simonides does not encourage Hiero to kill himself, or even to examine “whether suicide is an advisable course of action” (58). This “action” of Simonides “breaks down the walls of Hiero’s distrust” and is, as such, “the peripeteia of the dialogue” (58). Henceforth Hiero is convinced that Simonides poses no threat.¹⁶ Having removed Hiero’s distrust, Simonides will be in a position to begin to teach him how to rule well or better as a tyrant. At the same time, Simonides has intimated by his “action” the wise view of tyranny: the wise do not desire to rule.

How successful is Simonides as a teacher? Considerations of space prevent me from exploring Strauss’ answer to this question. Suffice it to note that while

16 Consider how Strauss puts the achievement of Simonides at 117 n. 61. As for the intention of Simonides in the dialogue, consider 121 n. 50, as well as Simonides’s advice to Hiero, which he offers unprompted, that “a tyrant ought not to hesitate to spend his own money for the common good” (63, referring to *Hiero* 11.1). One kind of expense Simonides is contemplating is indicated by his use (at the center) of the word *παράστασις* (“residency at the side of [the tyrant as an adviser]”) at 11.2. Cf. also 36, where Strauss reports, though only in part, a statement ascribed to Simonides by Aristotle. (In his note, Strauss refers the reader to the full statement: *Rhetoric* 1391a8–11.)

Simonides is not entirely unsuccessful—for example, he teaches Hiero the need to “banis[h] from sight” the hateful aspects of tyranny, if not to annihilate them—he fails to convince Hiero to rule as a virtuous tyrant (62). In the peroration of the dialogue, Simonides makes an “almost boundless promise” to Hiero that if he rules virtuously and competes successfully with “other leaders of cities for victory in the noblest and grandest contest—viz., in making his city as happy as possible,” he will “not be envied while being happy” (64). But the answer of the tyrant to this almost boundless promise is “polite silence” (64). Hiero’s “action” in the dialogue—his failure to move away from his city—shows that he is moved by “citizen spirit.” But this “citizen spirit” is not strong enough. Simonides cannot reach his pedagogic goal by appealing to it. The conversational setting of the *Hiero* illuminates the limited teachability of virtue.¹⁷

5 On “The Teaching Concerning Tyranny”

When we turn to consider the fourth and central section of *On Tyranny*, we are once again confronted with an unexpected title. Strauss’ programmatic statement in section II made it clear that what he called there the “‘tyrannical’ teaching” of Xenophon would be the guiding thread of his study of the *Hiero* (34–5). We now face the task of articulating the content of that teaching after having examined (in section III) the dialogical form in which it is presented by Xenophon. Yet Strauss titles section IV *not* “The ‘Tyrannical’ Teaching,” as we might well have expected him to, but rather “The Teaching Concerning Tyranny.” Are these two formulations interchangeable? If so, why does Strauss use a different formulation now? And if they are not interchangeable, what is the difference?

“Since tyranny is essentially a faulty political order, the teaching concerning tyranny necessarily consists of two parts. The first part has to make manifest the specific shortcomings of tyranny (‘pathology’), and the second part has to show how these shortcomings can be mitigated (‘therapeutics’)” (66). The

17 The third subsection of section III is brief. It concerns “The Use of Characteristic Terms” (that is, the use of terms that are characteristic of Xenophon, of Simonides and of Hiero). Strauss notes that Simonides never uses the term “law,” and that his only mention of justice pertains to a low or secondary form of it—“justice in business dealings” (64; see also 69). (Strauss states later that “justice in business dealings” is “not essentially dependent on law” [74; see also 71]). Simonides is said to speak laughingly once; “Hiero is always serious” (64). Laughter (or play) and seriousness are related in opposite ways to gentlemanliness (94).

teaching concerning tyranny is thus, according to Strauss, a political teaching about how to improve tyranny, that is, how to rule well or better as a tyrant. At first glance, Strauss appears to equate this teaching concerning tyranny with the "tyrannical" teaching insofar as he speaks of "the whole 'tyrannical' teaching" as being comprised of "both the indictment of tyranny and the correction of tyranny" (67). In other words, the two formulations alluded to a moment ago appear to be interchangeable. Yet the statement about the content of the "tyrannical" teaching occurs in a paragraph in which Strauss is considering "the primarily *practical* character of the 'tyrannical' teaching as a *political* teaching" (66, my emphasis). Yet we know from the programmatic statement of section II that the "tyrannical" teaching is *not* primarily a practical or a political teaching. It is "a philosophic teaching" (35). Indeed, Strauss describes in section IV the "tyrannical" teaching as a "theoretical thesis" that has "a purely theoretical meaning," and he dismisses as a "popular misunderstanding" the notion that this teaching is a "practical proposal" (76). In other words, we must be careful *not* to equate or reduce the "tyrannical" teaching to a teaching concerning how to correct or improve tyranny. "The Teaching Concerning Tyranny" is to "The 'Tyrannical' Teaching" (we might say) what the purpose of the *Hiero* is to its intention. Why, then, did Strauss choose for section IV the (more modest or limited) title "The Teaching Concerning Tyranny" instead of "The 'Tyrannical' Teaching," a title that we also expected?

Strauss begins section IV with some remarks on the relation between "content" and "form." Since Xenophon chose to present the "tyrannical" teaching in the form of a dialogue and not "in its pure, scientific form, in the form of a treatise," a "certain ambiguity" is bound to remain about the content of that teaching (66). "The reader has to add to and to subtract from Hiero's and Simonides' speeches in order to lay hold of Xenophon's teaching" (66). Strauss is especially interested here in one specific ambiguity which stems from the particular conversational setting adopted by Xenophon in the *Hiero*. The choice of conversational setting led Xenophon to give "a greater weight, at least apparently, to the praise of tyranny [in the second part of the dialogue, i.e., in chaps. 8–11] than to the indictment of tyranny [in the first part, i.e., in chaps. 1–7]" (67). But (Strauss asks) is this outcome the inevitable consequence of the fact that "[a]n effective conversational treatment of tyranny which is free from inconveniences is impossible" (68)? Or is the greater weight apparently given by Xenophon to the praise of tyranny in the *Hiero* somehow "directly intended" by him (67)?

Strauss develops the case that the greater weight given to the praise of tyranny is directly intended by Xenophon (cf. 74). He also explains, or begins to explain, what the praise means. To start with, the praise of tyranny in the *Hiero* is sufficiently limited, Strauss stresses, because the wise man who praises tyranny

“makes sufficiently clear the essential shortcomings of tyranny” (68). These essential shortcomings are two: (1) “tyranny is such rule as is exercised over unwilling subjects” and (2) tyranny is rule that “accords, not with laws, but with the will of the ruler” (68). Admittedly, tyranny at its best can overcome the first shortcoming: as described or corrected by Simonides, tyranny at its best is “most certainly rule over willing subjects” (68). But even at its best, tyranny “remains rule ‘not according to laws,’ i.e., it is absolute government” (68). Is the praise of tyranny in the *Hiero* somehow intended as praise of rule that transcends law? Does the praise of tyranny, or of tyranny at its best, point to the limits of law?

Before answering this question, Strauss emphasizes the negative practical consequences of the absence of laws even in tyranny at its best. Those ruled by the tyrant “are literally at the mercy of the tyrant and his mercenaries, and they can only wish or pray that the tyrant will become, or remain, beneficent” (70). In particular, the tyrant’s subjects can have no property rights against their master: even the best tyrant “would consider his fatherland his estate” (70). Above all, the absence of laws in a tyranny results in an absence of freedom: “no laws, no liberty” (69 cf. epigraph). Still, while these and other shortcomings of tyranny—even of tyranny at its best—are undoubtedly substantial, they “are not . . . necessarily decisive” (70). Tyranny is admittedly incompatible with freedom. But this drawback of tyranny would be decisive only if freedom were to be given absolute importance. How, then, should freedom be assessed? Strauss notes that the tyrant Hiero implicitly asserts that “the wise are not concerned with freedom,” and this assertion, he suggests, reflects the view of Xenophon as well, who “was not a democrat” (71). (The aim of democracy, Strauss reminds us, was considered to be freedom.) The central concern of Xenophon was not freedom but virtue: “Only if virtue were impossible without freedom, would the demand for freedom be absolutely justified from Xenophon’s point of view” (71). The key question is therefore whether virtue is possible under a tyrant.

Strauss takes up this delicate question in what is literally the central paragraph of the central section of *On Tyranny*. He points out that the term “virtue” occurs (only) five times in the *Hiero*. In only two of these five instances is the term applied to human beings. The term is applied only once to the tyrant and never to the tyrant’s subjects. Moreover, Simonides “does not mention the virtue of the city as a possible goal of tyrannical rule” (71). In light of this evidence, it could appear that virtue is not possible under a tyrant. And indeed, this conclusion is correct in one sense: “It is safe to say that a city ruled by a tyrant is not supposed by [Simonides] to ‘practice gentlemanliness as a matter of public concern’ ” (71 cf. *Resp. Lac.* 10.4). Yet Strauss also reminds us at

this juncture of Socrates, whose life shows that “there are virtuous men in cities which do not ‘practice gentlemanliness as a matter of public concern.’ It is therefore an open question whether and how far virtue is possible under a tyrant” (71). In other words, Strauss is reminding us here of the distinction he made earlier between the two meanings of gentlemanliness. Ordinary gentlemanliness is impossible under a tyrant. It is certainly impossible as a matter of public concern. Among other difficulties, ordinary gentlemanliness requires “independent means,” and independent means are impossible under a tyrant: all property rights are precarious there (119 n. 25). The case of the impoverished Socrates shows, however, that philosophic gentlemanliness is possible even in the absence of independent means. For, just as a horse can possess the virtue of a horse without wealth, a human being can possess the virtue of a human being without wealth (*Oeconomicus* 11.1–7 cf. 119 n. 25). But if genuine or true virtue is possible under a tyrant after all, and if tyranny, even tyranny at its best, is rule without laws, it would appear to follow that genuine virtue is possible even in the absence of laws. The crucial implication of the central paragraph of the central section of *On Tyranny* is that genuine virtue is not based upon law.¹⁸

If gentlemen can live, and live happily, under a beneficent tyrant, as Simonides asserts that they can, and as Strauss suggests that Xenophon holds, it might seem that tyranny can “live up to Xenophon’s highest political standard” (72 cf. 190). Hitherto, Strauss has insisted that tyranny is “essentially a faulty political order” (66), “a radically faulty political order” that, even at its best, “suffers from serious defects” (59, 68). We have now reached a vantage point from which the claim of (beneficent) tyranny to be the best regime can be entertained. To be sure, Strauss is careful to emphasize the “very great importance” of the fact that according to Xenophon, “the aim of the good ruler is much more likely to

18 On the (Platonic) notion of “genuine virtue” or “true virtue”: 109 n. 27 and 101. See also 202. In the paragraph that immediately follows the central paragraph (and which contains a reconsideration of the facts mentioned in it), Strauss makes clear that ordinary gentlemanliness is not “the summit of virtue” and that the beneficent tyrant is not forced by necessity to prevent his subjects from reaching that summit (71). Strauss goes so far as to assert that “one has no right to assume” that the virtue that *is* possible under a tyrant—including a sort of fear-bred moderation—is meant to be inferior in dignity to republican virtue” (72). The reconsideration in question is needed to make clear that if “[o]nly a qualified, or reduced form of courage and justice befits the subjects of a tyrant” (71), one must not conclude from this that courage simply and justice simply—or a combination of courage simply and justice simply, which Strauss has equated with ordinary gentlemanliness (42; see also 43)—are (is) the summit of virtue.

be achieved by means of laws than by means of absolute rule" (72). Xenophon "seems to have thought that tyranny at its best could hardly, if ever, be realized" (75). Still, "[t]his does not do away . . . with the admission that, as a matter of principle, rule of laws is not essential for good government" (72–3).

"To begin with, it must appear most paradoxical that Xenophon should have had any liking whatsoever for tyranny however good. Tyranny at its best is still rule without laws and, according to Socrates' definition, justice is identical with legality or obedience to laws" (73). Hence, "tyranny in any form seems to be irreconcilable with the requirement of justice" (73). But Strauss argues that the identification of the just with the legal is not, according to Xenophon (and his Socrates), "absolutely correct" (73). For, what is law? "The laws which determine what is legal are the rules of conduct upon which the citizens have agreed" (73). Who counts as a citizen will vary, however, from city to city: "The citizens' may be 'the multitude' or 'the few'; 'the few' may be the rich or the virtuous" (73). In other words, "the laws, and hence what is legal, depend on the political order of the community for which they are given"; they depend on the πολιτεία, on the regime (73). Strauss adduces several arguments (and some textual evidence) to show that Xenophon and his Socrates were not satisfied, from a theoretical point of view, with the equation of justice with legality. Among other difficulties, they could not have believed "that the difference between laws depending on a faulty political order and laws depending on a good political order is wholly irrelevant as far as justice is concerned" (73). The equation of the just with the legal is less a theoretical conclusion than a practical stance, according to Strauss. It reflects that for all practical purposes, rule of laws is preferable to rule without laws. (It is nevertheless true that what we, human beings, mean by the "just" is most of the time really the "legal," and thus that the equation in question captures an important aspect of our moral experience.) The limits of the equation of the just with the legal enable Xenophon to propose an alternative and more adequate definition of justice: "the just man is a man who does not hurt anyone, but helps everyone who has dealings with him. To be just . . . simply means to be beneficent" (74). Hence, if justice is "essentially translegal," as Xenophon's second definition suggests, "rule without laws may very well be just: . . . [a]bsolute rule of a man who knows how to rule, who is a born ruler, is actually superior to the rule of laws, in so far as the good ruler is 'a seeing law,' and laws do not 'see,' or legal justice is blind. Whereas a good ruler is necessarily beneficent, laws are not necessarily beneficent" (74). By raising and answering the Socratic question "What is law?," Xenophon came to understand the problem of law and of its limitations. This enabled and compelled him "to grant that tyranny may live up to the highest political standard": "the rule of an excellent tyrant is superior to, or more just than, rule of laws" (74). But this superiority is based upon *knowledge*, which is the only sufficient

title to rule, according to Xenophon and Socrates. For neither man was "a legitimist or constitutionalist" (74).

It therefore seems that tyranny will live up to the highest political standard if the tyrant is wise and therefore has no need of laws. Tyranny at its best is the rule of the philosopher-tyrant. Xenophon's highest political standard is identical to Plato's insofar as the philosopher-tyrant is, in the highest sense, indistinguishable from the philosopher-king: both are beneficent rulers guided by knowledge alone. Strauss does not refer to the possibility that a philosopher might rule a city as a beneficent tyrant, however (cf. 211). He focuses instead on what is perhaps a lesser, but more likely, possibility: that an alliance might be struck between a tyrant and a wise man, where the tyrant listens to the advice of the wise man and rules knowledgeably without recourse to laws: "Tyrannical rule as well as 'constitutional' rule will be legitimate to the extent to which the tyrant or the 'constitutional' rulers will listen to the counsels of him who 'speaks well' because he 'thinks well' " (75). That is, the *Hiero* would appear to point to the possibility of an alliance between tyrannical power and wisdom while showing both the need of the tyrant for wise guidance and the capacity of the wise man to impart this guidance. For unlike the king, whose rule is guided by and based on the law, the tyrant, who rules without laws, "needs essentially a teacher"; it is the tyrant rather than the king who "has any use for the wise man or the philosopher" (121 n. 50).

Strauss has therefore led us to a point where we can appreciate that the "tyrannical" teaching of Xenophon is not primarily a political or a practical teaching. It is a "theoretical thesis" (as we mentioned earlier) that is "not more than a most forceful expression of the problem of law and legitimacy" (76). To be sure, Strauss acknowledges that this "theoretical thesis" has practical or political consequences as well. For one, the acceptance of the "tyrannical" teaching prevented Socrates and Xenophon from being "unqualifiedly loyal to Athenian democracy" because "it prevented them from believing that democracy is simply the best political order. It prevented them from being 'good citizens' (in the precise sense of the term) under a democracy" (76). At this point, however, the reader begins to wonder: granted that an acceptance of the "tyrannical" teaching was bound to have weakened Socrates's (and Xenophon's) attachment to Athenian democracy, did it not also make them good citizens in a deeper (though, perhaps, in a less precise or less narrow) sense? For their shared critique of Athenian democracy would have been guided, presumably, by their vision of the best regime, i.e., by their understanding of the desirability of beneficent and knowledgeable tyranny, and by their readiness, perhaps, to benefit the city by working toward the actualization of such a regime if or when circumstances allowed (cf. 85–6, 200; 43).

In section IV, Strauss does not discuss any notion of citizenship other than the one “in the precise sense of the term.” But he beckons in the direction of another, deeper or more radical notion. (Consider the explicit shift in the meaning of citizenship at 78–9.) In the present section, Strauss has led us to a noble vision of harmony and cooperation between the tyrant and the wise man, where they work together to benefit the city without recourse to laws. But Strauss ends by stressing the *distance* between tyranny and wisdom. For we have seen that the tyrant Hiero is animated by “citizen spirit.” Strauss recalls this fact or insight here: “The ultimate reason why the very tyrant Hiero strongly indicts tyranny is precisely that he is at bottom a citizen” (76). Strauss also reminds us that the wise Simonides is, by contrast, “a ‘stranger,’ a man who does not have citizen responsibilities” (76). What is implied in this contrast is intimated too: “*If the city is essentially the community kept together and ruled by law*, the ‘tyrannical’ teaching cannot exist for the citizen as citizen” (76, my emphasis).¹⁹ Hiero is “at bottom a citizen,” and this means that he belongs to the city essentially. But if the city is “essentially the community kept together and ruled by law,” the tyrant must be, at bottom, a man of the law.

What is the meaning of this somewhat strange, if not unexpected, conclusion? After all (and to say nothing of considerations too obvious to be mentioned), the tyrant rules without laws. Strauss has stressed this point repeatedly. How, then, can a tyrant like Hiero be said to be a man of the law (to use an expression that is our own, not Strauss’)? And what is the meaning of the parallel (implicit) conclusion that the “stranger” Simonides is *not* a man of the law?

6 Conclusion: *Prolegomena* to an Adequate Interpretation of *On Tyranny*

The reader of *On Tyranny* must ruminate on the foregoing questions when considering the last three sections of the book. In striving to establish the stance of the wise man and the tyrant (or the ruler) toward law and toward citizenship in the most radical sense, the reader will need to attend to Strauss’ treatment of the all-important case of the “truly wise” Socrates, who is described repeatedly as a “citizen-philosopher” (35; 77, 87, 97–8, 105). Strauss appears to mean that Socrates occupies a middle position between the unwise citizen Hiero and the wise stranger Simonides that is somehow superior to their respective stances.

19 Consider the even stronger “repetition” of this statement at 99, where the conditional “if” becomes “In so far,” and where the city is not only “kept together” but even “constituted” by law.

But in what sense (or senses) is Socrates a "citizen" in addition to being a philosopher (see 87 and 104–5; cf. 205–6)?²⁰

Meanwhile, it will have become clear that the "tyrannical" teaching of Xenophon—a teaching about the limits of law in the most comprehensive sense—is not articulated in its entirety in section IV of *On Tyranny*. (This is why, I believe, Strauss does not title section IV "The 'Tyrannical' Teaching"; he is thereby calling attention to the limited character of his analysis in that section.) For if Strauss has shown hitherto that the "tyrannical" teaching holds that law is not essential to good government, he has yet to clarify adequately the role of law, according to the same teaching, in the best human life. Indeed, he reminds us in the opening line of section V that "[t]he primary subject of the conversation described in the *Hiero* is not the improvement of tyrannical government, but the difference between tyrannical and private life with regard to human enjoyments and pains"—that is, it is a question (concerning that difference) that is "only a special form of the fundamental Socratic question of how man ought to live" (78).

The reader who turns to section V ("The Two Ways of Life") and section VI ("Pleasure and Virtue") of *On Tyranny* to find the missing part of the "tyrannical" teaching is surprised, at first, that Strauss no longer speaks explicitly, to begin with at least, of the "tyrannical" teaching of Xenophon, nor does he speak of "law" or "citizenship." But this initial silence does not mean that Strauss is no longer articulating the "tyrannical" teaching beyond section IV. In fact, Strauss will again discuss the "tyrannical" teaching explicitly and in striking fashion toward the end of section VI, where he again discusses both citizenship and law as well (99 cf. 94; 96ff.).²¹ Why, then, does Strauss fail even to allude to the "tyrannical" teaching in the bulk of sections V–VI? His reticence ought not to be interpreted as a sign that he is pursuing some nefarious or shameful goal—i.e., that he is a covert teacher of tyrannical rule. For Strauss could not be clearer: the life of tyrannical rule, and the political life more generally, is as such essentially inferior to the private life of wisdom: "The wise man sits leisurely upon the very goal toward which the ruler is blindly and furiously working his way and which he will never reach" (86 cf. 82). Rather, we must recall that Xenophon himself refused to expound the "tyrannical" teaching explicitly in written form; he left it to his readers to disentangle and piece together that teaching from those of his writings "in which [he] speaks in his own name or presents the views of Socrates" (76 cf. 34–5). Likewise, the

20 Regarding the case of Xenophon, see Strauss' remarks on "cosmopolitanism" (99).

21 That 99 is an obvious "repetition" of 76 strongly suggests that the intervening portion of text—which includes all of section V and the bulk of section VI—bears directly on the articulation of the "tyrannical" teaching.

reticence of Strauss reflects his awareness that the “tyrannical” teaching—though it is a mere “theoretical thesis”—is open to popular misunderstanding and is, as such, a delicate subject-matter (76 cf. 99).²² And there is another and deeper reason for Strauss’ reticence as well. Precisely if he is to guide potential philosophers to the philosophic life, or prepare them to choose that life, as I have claimed that he intends to do, Strauss must train his addressees to think for themselves without always “dotting all the *i*’s” (cf. 27–8). His reticence is guided above all by his pedagogic intention.²³

22 The “tyrannical” teaching entails a “theoretical and practical depreciation of the fatherland or the city” which, as Strauss reminds us with the example of B.G. Niebuhr, can elicit “blind indignation” (98).

23 Consider Strauss (1939): “[According to the classical authors,] nobody should know even the formulations of the truth who had not rediscovered the truth by his own exertions, if aided by subtle suggestions from a superior teacher. It is in this way that the classical authors became the most efficient teachers of independent thinking” (p. 535).—In section v, Strauss analyzes the limits of law (i.e., he continues to articulate the “tyrannical” teaching) primarily through a discussion of the respective attitudes of the wise man and the ruler toward beneficence, or caring, or service to others: that is, toward justice in one common meaning of the term (see especially 87–91; cf. *Memorabilia* 4.8.11 and note 14 of this essay). In studying section V, the reader has to pay special attention to Strauss’ discussion of “honor.” For “[j]ust as desire for honor is characteristic of Simonides [*qua* representative of wisdom], desire for love [i.e. for being loved] is characteristic of Hiero [*qua* representative of rule]” (88). But what is the meaning of Strauss’ rather odd claim that the wise man is somehow characterized by the desire for “honor”? After all, Strauss asserts in the “Restatement” that the lover of wisdom is, *qua* philosopher, free of ambition or φιλοτιμία (love of honor) (203). Or could it be that the desire for “honor,” as Strauss writes about it in section v of the original essay, comes to be used, not at first but in the final part of the section (para. 17–21), as something of a stand-in for something else? There is textual evidence for this suggestion: in the “Restatement,” Strauss indicates that “honor” (as well as “love”), as these terms were used in section v of the original essay, must ultimately be put in quotation marks (199). But what specific issue is being discussed, or approached, through “honor”? Consider, e.g., 114 n. 29 toward the end.—In section vi, Strauss analyzes the limits of law (i.e., he continues to articulate the “tyrannical” teaching) primarily through a discussion of the thesis that “friendship is a greater good than the fatherland [or the city]” (97). What does the thesis mean? “In so far as friendship is being loved, preferring friendship to fatherland is tantamount to preferring oneself to others... [i]t is tantamount to preferring one’s pleasure to one’s duties to others” (97). Toward the end of section vi, Strauss states that the “tyrannical” teaching serves the purpose “not of solving the problem of the best political order, but of bringing to light the nature of political things” (99). Specifically, it brings to light that “[l]aw and legitimacy are problematic from the highest point of view, namely, from that of wisdom” (99). The point of view of wisdom is the point of view of the “greatest good” or the “highest good,” and this good is achievable by certain individuals, not by the city: “the best city is morally and

As Strauss admits, *On Tyranny* remains an incomplete account of the political philosophy of Xenophon. This incompleteness is ultimately due to the fact that he does not treat comprehensively and in detail Xenophon's Socratic writings (cf. 105 *in fine*).²⁴ Accordingly, he ends his treatment of the "tyrannical" teaching proper by acknowledging that "[t]he *Hiero* does not supply us then with the most adequate formulation of Xenophon's view regarding the relation of pleasure and virtue" (102). Still, "it is the only writing of Xenophon which has the merit, and even the function, of posing the problem of [the relation of pleasure and virtue] in its most radical form"—"in the form of the question as to whether the demands of virtue cannot be completely replaced by, or reduced to, the desire for pleasure, if for the highest pleasure" (102). We may also venture to state the limitation of the *Hiero* this way: while the dialogue contains several searching pointers and remarkable indications about the character of genuine virtue, it falls short of offering, by itself, a definitive analysis of the question of the best life because it does not do justice to the dignity of the gentleman, or of the way of life of the gentleman. After all, the two interlocutors of the *Hiero* are a tyrant, on one hand, and a poet famous for his greed, on the other: "Hiero's and Simonides' gentlemanliness is not altogether beyond doubt" (105). Thus the *Hiero* does not treat definitively the gentlemanly view that virtue is "an end in itself"—that is, that we humans have "duties to others" that make "demands" on us, duties defined by the moral law (cf. 100, 97, 102; see also 90). In this way the *Hiero* points toward the study of its twin dialogue, the *Oeconomicus*, the theme of which is the perfect gentleman. Still, the limitation of the *Hiero* does not reduce the present investigation to a wild goose chase. For without repeating here what has been indicated about genuine or true virtue, the conversational setting of the *Hiero*—the "action" of the dialogue—has enabled Strauss (and us) to bring to light that the tyrant and the wise man stand toward law, or toward law-based virtue, in a manner opposite to what we expected at first. More generally, we have prepared the ground for an adequate interpretation of *On Tyranny*, having demonstrated that Strauss' analysis of law is the key to his intention, and that this intention is pedagogic in character.²⁵

intellectually on a lower plane than the best individual. The city as such exists on a lower plane than the individual as such" (84–5, 101; 99).

- 24 What Strauss chooses to call the "tyrannical" teaching in *On Tyranny* is, at the end of the day, nothing other than the full Socratic inquiry into virtue, or the teaching that issues from that inquiry.
- 25 Regarding the remaining question as to why "the philosopher is urged . . . to educate human beings of a certain kind"—nay, why he "*must* go to the market place in order to fish there for potential philosophers"—the reader will want to turn, in the first place

In the seventh and final section of *On Tyranny* ("Piety and Law"), Strauss adumbrates the place that the "tyrannical" teaching occupies "within the whole of wisdom" (34–5). Specifically, he begins to take up there the question of "the origin of the natural order" or of "the universe," that is, the question of causality (105).²⁶ Yet he only begins to take it up. In his debate with Kojève, Strauss will acknowledge that the utmost he can hope to have shown in their public exchange is that "Xenophon's thesis [regarding the relation of tyranny and wisdom] is not only compatible with the idea of philosophy but required by it" (212). But, Strauss immediately adds, "[t]his is very little."

For the question arises immediately whether the idea of philosophy is not itself in need of legitimation. Philosophy in the strict and classical sense is quest for the eternal order or for the eternal cause or causes of all things. It presupposes then that there is an eternal and unchangeable order within which History takes place and which is not in any way affected by History. It presupposes in other words that any "realm of freedom" is no more than a dependent province within "the realm of necessity." . . . This presupposition is not self-evident. (212)²⁷

(though not in the last), to Strauss' discussion in the "Restatement" of the apparent link between a healthy or well-ordered soul, produced by a Socratic education, and the philosopher's attempt to know the whole or "to grasp the eternal order" (202, 205 my emphasis, 200; 200–2 and, generally, 196–205).

26 On 104, Strauss compares parallel expressions of the tyrant Hiero in the *Hiero* and of the gentleman Ischomachus in the *Oeconomicus*. Focusing on the differences in these expressions, he observes that "Hiero replaces 'the god' or 'the gods' [i.e. the words used by Ischomachus] by 'nature'" (104). He adds that "Xenophon's Simonides never corrects him" (104). In other words, Strauss suggests that Xenophon's Simonides accepts the replacement or substitution made by Hiero. At the same time, however, Strauss points out that Xenophon's Simonides "seems to be the same Simonides who is said repeatedly to have postponed and finally abandoned the attempt to answer the question which Hiero had posed him, What is God?" (105). But in view of his abandonment of this question, or of his inability to answer it, how did Simonides *know* that the foregoing substitution was justified or correct? Here we must consider again that Simonides is "not a citizen-philosopher," as Strauss stresses in the present context (104). His not being a citizen-philosopher is linked, I believe, to his not being "truly wise," as we have seen that he is not, according to Strauss (35 and p. 238 of this essay). For as a wandering poet, he would not have conversed with his fellow-citizens, including the young and most promising among them, in the manner of a Socrates. See above all the seminal discussion of Bruell (1984).

27 For the history of the final paragraph of the "Restatement," of which the quoted passage is a part, see Patard (2008), 24–7.

How did Strauss proceed to vindicate or defend what he apparently viewed as the fundamental presupposition of philosophy in the strict and classical sense—the presupposition, namely, that the cause (or causes) of all things or of the whole are eternal? We may suppose that the answer to this question—as well as an examination of its underlying premise—is to be sought in Strauss' later work, including the "Restatement" but also *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse*, his interpretation of the dialogue that contains Xenophon's account of the Socratic turn, the *Oeconomicus*.

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Socratic Rhetoric and Political Philosophy: Leo Strauss on Xenophon's *Symposium*

Dustin Gish

“With respect to what ought not be said,” replied Socrates, “be silent.”

—XENOPHON, *Symposium* 6.10

This chapter is an examination of Leo Strauss' study of Xenophon's *Symposium*. Since that study is made to appear as the final section of *Xenophon's Socrates*, published in 1972, which itself is the final volume of Strauss' interpretation of Xenophon's Socratic writings as a whole, we must consider Strauss' interpretation of this dialogue in light of his treatment elsewhere of the problem of Socrates, according to Aristophanes and Plato, as well as Xenophon, and therefore with the origins of political philosophy itself.

1 The Socratic Turn

The tradition of political philosophy traces its origin back to the thought of Socrates, the first philosopher to recognize that human affairs—above all, the political things (*ta politika*)—are worthy of serious study, and indeed are “of decisive importance for understanding nature as a whole.”¹ This Socrates, that is, “the true Socrates,” who had emerged out of the comic portrait of an earlier Socrates depicted in Aristophanes' *Clouds* and whose thought had become eminently political, we in turn know only in and through the writings of his students, Xenophon and Plato.² The Socratic writings of both authors, but especially Xenophon, refute the identification of this true Socrates with that ridiculous image of “a certain Socrates” as a “Thinker” and “idle talker,” characterized by an “amazing lack of *phronesis*, of practical wisdom or prudence,” one who was unaware of the context within which philosophy takes

1 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 158.

2 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 140, 158, 164.

place, and radically “unpolitical” because utterly lacking in self-knowledge.³ The “turn” in Socratic thought away from philosophic inquiry and investigations of natural phenomena, or natural science, towards political philosophy, which was occasioned by the true Socrates’ reflection on the absurdity of the Aristophanean Socrates, carried philosophy down from the heavens and settled it within its proper political milieu.⁴

Having considered both at length, Strauss concluded that, while perhaps at times differing in their portraits of Socrates as much as serious tragedy does from comedy, the Socrates of Xenophon and of Plato are nevertheless identical.⁵ Why? The earlier Socrates, being “unerotic” and “unaware of the essential difference between philosophy and the polis,” had failed to grasp the character of the political as such. “To this accusation,” however, “Xenophon and Plato give one and the same reply. Socrates is political and erotic.” Both presentations of Socrates, Strauss contends, must be taken “as replies to Aristophanes’s presentation of Socrates,” because in their Socratic writings we discover that Socrates “was eminently political. He was *the* philosopher of self-knowledge, and therefore of practical wisdom.”⁶ Xenophon and Plato recognized the post-turn Socrates as the true Socrates, the founder of political philosophy, and so depicted him in and through their writings as *the* political philosopher, the one who first grasped the distinct nature of political affairs and the examination of the human things as the key to understanding the whole. While turning attention to the human things, Socrates also realized the limitations of the pursuit of wisdom and the power of speech, especially with respect to that aspect of human beings which is “recalcitrant to reason and which therefore cannot be persuaded.”⁷

3 Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 18b–d, 19c; Xenophon, *Symposium* 6.6–10. Strauss (1958 [1996]), 154, 157, 158, 164, 193.

4 Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 11.1–7; Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* v.4.

5 See Bruell (1998) xvii: “Strauss’ summary orientation implies—what his books also show—that despite these and other differences of presentation . . . Xenophon’s Socrates is identical to the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues.”

6 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 193, 164.

7 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 162–3, 186.

2 Xenophon's Socratic Rhetoric

For Strauss, the Socrates of Xenophon and of Plato are identical; yet he is aware that their respective presentations of Socrates and his way of life in writing appear to differ substantially. Plato's Socrates, for example, in his formal defense against the accusations against him derived from the *Clouds*, explicitly names Aristophanes as his accuser and calls on his fellow Athenians to bear witness to the fact that he never conversed with them about "the things under the earth" or "the heavenly things," instead limiting his study "entirely to the human and political things."⁸ Even so, Aristophanes himself appears in the Platonic dialogue, *Symposium*, and converses with Socrates agreeably. The dialogue finally concludes, according to Strauss, with what appears to be friendly agreement, rather than enmity, between the political philosopher and the comic poet.⁹ Aristophanes thus comes to light in Plato's work as an amiable and admiring, yet envious critic of Socrates. Xenophon, in his *Symposium*, reports Socrates' urbane replies to another entertainer dependent on popular reputation who, also being envious, repeated the abusive caricature of him by Aristophanes; that conversation, too, concluded in friendly, albeit partial, agreement between Socrates and his critic, the Syracusan.¹⁰ So while Aristophanes himself was not present here, or in any other of his Socratic writings, Strauss argues that Xenophon as author nevertheless had the comic poet—and his harsh critique of the unpolitical Socrates—always in mind.¹¹

8 Plato, *Apology* 19b–d. Strauss (1970 [1998]), 164.

9 Plato, *Symposium* 223b–d. Strauss (1958 [1996]), 140–1.

10 Xenophon, *Symposium* 6.6–10, 7.2–5, cf. 9.2–7. Strauss (1972), 168–70. On the identity of the Syracusan, see Strauss (1972), 178, 179–80; see also Bruell (1998), xiv–xv.

11 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 160–161. See Meier (2006), 27. Xenophon omits direct references to the old accusations against the ridiculous Aristophanean Socrates in his three accounts of Socrates' reply to his accusers at his trial: *Memorabilia* 1.1–2, IV.8; *Apology of Socrates to the Jury*. In one account he associates one of the two accusations leveled against Socrates by Aristophanes—that he was a teacher of an art of rhetoric as well as of natural science—with the "most violent" Kritias, who "bore it in mind against him" and slandered him before the *demos* (*Mem.* 1.2.31). This is the only mention in the *Memorabilia* of the Greek word *apomnêmonenein*, "to recollect," from which the work's title is derived. According to Strauss (1972 [1998]: 3), this suffices to establish that Xenophon's critique of Socrates is ironical: "To use this passage for the interpretation of the title is to begin with the height of absurdity, and we all are beginners."

To understand precisely how these two recollections by Plato and Xenophon of the true Socrates as *the* political philosopher differ in form,¹² and yet are identical in substance, we must see how in Strauss' view Xenophon keeps Aristophanes (and the grudge his critique engendered) always in mind in his Socratic writings. To do so, he argues, we must attend to the overwhelming sense that there is a comic—or playful—aspect that conceals the seriousness of Xenophon's Socrates, especially insofar as that seriousness was likely to be perceived by the *polis* in which he lived his way of life not only as ridiculous but also as a threat:

Through the use of ridiculous things Socrates is shown by Xenophon to be in harmony with respectability and with the city, and to contribute through his activities to civic or political excellence of the highest order. Xenophon's Socratic writings, one might dare to say, constitute a reply to Aristophanes's *Clouds* on the level of the *Clouds*, and with a most subtle use of the means of Aristophanes. We could use this observation as a clue to Xenophon's Socratic writings if we were not wholly averse to paradoxes. Let us rather turn to the most obvious, to the surface, and cling to it as much as we can.¹³

Reflecting on this paradoxical claim that Xenophon's Socratic writings, unlike those of Plato, are ridiculous,¹⁴ we wonder if comedy—a kind of playfulness—is the key to understanding his Socrates.¹⁵ For the philosopher as such viewed from the perspective of non-philosophers is “necessarily

12 While their Socrates is identical in the crucial respects, Xenophon's and Plato's presentations of Socrates—as well as their relation to him—differ. See Strauss (1983), 128: “Surely, Xenophon (does not equal Plato) presents himself in his difference from Socrates.” On the ironic character of that difference, consider Strauss (1972 [1998]), 20–21, 171. See also Bruell (2000), 2.

13 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 161.

14 Cf. Plato, *Hippias Major* 288b, 290a, in which Socrates assumes the voice of “a certain human being” who creates “perplexity” in others and is accused of being “ridiculous” and laughable.

15 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 144: “While the tension between the ridiculous and the serious is essential to the Aristophanean comedy, the peculiar greatness of that comedy consists in its being the total comedy or in the fact that in that comedy the comical is all persuasive: the serious itself appears only in the guise of the ridiculous. This must be intelligently understood.”

ridiculous; the meeting of philosophers and non-philosophers is the natural theme of comedy.”¹⁶ In this sense Xenophon must be writing comedies.

To return then to the surface of Xenophon’s Socratic writings, as Strauss suggests, and to therewith return to “the problem” most obviously and inherently found there,¹⁷ namely, Socrates, we turn with Strauss to the *Symposium*. Although the title alone should suffice to make evident to readers the character of its surface, Xenophon in his own name testifies that its explicit theme is playfulness, and that in his judgment “deeds done in times of play” are worth recalling (*Sym.* 1.1). Yet while his Socratic writings may be subtly Aristophanean in form, Xenophon learned his art of writing not from the comic poet but from his teacher, Socrates. This art of writing, Strauss contends, is founded on an art of public speaking: “Xenophon’s rhetoric is Socratic rhetoric.”¹⁸

One word more is required regarding the surface of the *Symposium*. Strauss observes in his study of “the problem of Socrates”¹⁹ and the first volume of his interpretation of Xenophon,²⁰ that a tripartite division of human activity also informs his Socratic writings: “Xenophon divides all activities of men, and hence in particular those of Socrates, into what they say, what they do, and what they think or silently deliberate.”²¹ This division,” Strauss continues, would seem to “underlie the distinction among his three Socratic writings other than the *Memorabilia*.”²² This distinction, as Strauss concludes in his “Introduction” (which also serves as the introduction to his second volume), indicates that “the *Oeconomicus* is Xenophon’s Socratic *logos* or discourse par excellence.”²³ A similar statement regarding this tri-partition is

16 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 142.

17 Strauss (1958), 13: “The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.”

18 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 160.

19 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 138.

20 Strauss (1972 [1998]), Preface, Editor’s Note (Allan Bloom). *Xenophon’s Socratic Discourse* is Strauss’ interpretation of the *Oeconomicus*, “the most misunderstood of Xenophon’s Socratic writings” yet “the most revealing,” because the central chapter of that work “directly contrasted” Socrates with one who was held to be “a perfect gentleman.” In his first volume of commentary Strauss reveals “the profound difference” between Socrates and “the perfect gentleman,” and therewith why “Socrates is not a perfect gentleman” and does not even “wish to become a perfect gentleman himself.” In the second, *Xenophon’s Socrates*, Strauss completes his interpretation of the way Socrates spoke and acted in such a manner that rendered him almost indistinguishable to and from certain other gentlemen. Strauss (1970 [1998]), 159.

21 See Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.1.19 and *Anabasis* v.6.28.

22 Strauss (1970 [1998]), 86. See Bruell (1998), xvi–xvii.

23 Strauss (1970 [1998]), Introduction; Bruell (1998), xi.

made by Strauss in his “study” of Socrates, where it is immediately followed however with two “special remarks” that are “indispensable” to render this division of his work intelligible. The first of these remarks is that the *Symposium* “deals with deeds not performed in earnest or with seriousness, but playfully.”²⁴ The surface of Xenophon’s *Symposium* therefore calls our attention not only to the portrait of a playful Socrates therein, but to the playful deeds of gentlemen, including Socrates. Taking seriously a suggestion by Socrates himself in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* that deeds can be “more worthy testimony” of thoughts than speeches (*Mem.* IV.4.10), as well as the judgment of the author at the beginning of his work that playful deeds—especially of Socrates²⁵—are worth remembering, we are invited to consider the *Symposium* as being devoted to presenting *the* exemplary deed (*ergon*) of Xenophon’s Socrates, and therefore as Xenophon’s Socratic writing or work (*ergon*) *par excellence*.

3 Xenophon’s *Symposium*

Xenophon’s dialogue *Symposium* is arguably his most charming work.²⁶ If “Xenophon’s Socratic *logos* or discourse *par excellence*” is the *Oeconomicus*, in which Socrates practices the art of rhetoric in a conversation with a serious gentleman for the sake of education in dialectics,²⁷ then this playful Socratic work stands apart for its portrait of what Socrates *did* as well as *said*. The distinctive charm of Xenophon’s *Symposium*, which by its title points to a quarrel with Plato over how best to present Socrates, derives not only from the subtle comic wit displayed by the author in all of his writings, but also from the especially playful presentation of Socrates at leisure and ease here among a gathering of conventional Athenian gentlemen. This presentation is starkly at odds with the infamous one sketched by Aristophanes, and famous one by Plato, of

24 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 166; Strauss (1963), 8. Strauss rewrites his first indispensable remark into a parenthetical aside in the later “complete” interpretation, quietly indicating the way his manner of writing is identical to Xenophon’s and how he intends to be read. The second special remark regards the *Memorabilia*, which is not “simply” about Socrates since its purpose “as a whole is to prove Socrates’ justice, both legal and translegal.” Strauss (1958 [1996]), 163, 165–6.

25 Xenophon’s “most memorable experience was the deeds and speeches of Socrates.” Strauss (1970 [1998]), 84–5. According to Xenophon, Socrates benefited those who spent time with him as much when he was playful as when he was serious (*Mem.* IV.1.1).

26 Bruell (2000), 3, 15. See Strauss (1966), Lecture 15, 2–3.

27 Strauss (1970 [1998]), 86, 147–50; (1972 [1998]), 158. See Pangle (1983), 17–19.

a Socrates who irritates and infuriates his interlocutors by interrogating their unexamined opinions as a gadfly and gift of the gods to his *polis*, Athens. It was Socrates' prudence and moderation, on the other hand, expressed in his playful deeds on this occasion, which particularly impressed Xenophon and which he wanted to recollect for the sake of his own Socratic education.

Strauss thus opens his commentary on the *Symposium* in *Xenophon's Socrates*—which is the third and final section of the second volume of his interpretation of Xenophon's Socratic writings—with a subtle reference to Socratic moderation, understood here as the playfulness exhibited by both Xenophon and his Socrates. "The fact that at the beginning Socrates comes to sight as only one of many gentlemen engaged in playful deeds, slightly conceals the fact that the work depicts above all the playful deeds of Socrates," who "proves to be the central character."²⁸ In the context of Xenophon's Socratic writings, the *Symposium* thus "reveals itself as devoted not merely to Socrates' playful deeds but simply to his deeds," for while all deeds of Xenophon's Socrates can be considered playful—"his deed, as distinguished from his speech and his thought, is nothing but playful"—here we see Socrates' deed *par excellence*.²⁹ Socrates practiced an art of public speaking in Xenophon's account that made it possible for him to blend almost imperceptibly into the convivial company of gentlemen.

If the Socratic deed *par excellence* is a playful one amid other gentlemen, we may begin to wonder how this Socratic writing focused on that deed reveals Socratic thought. Xenophon tells us that Socrates taught moderation as the rhetorical prolegomena to his examination of the political things (*Mem.* iv.3.1). But his method of educating his companions to moderation often eschewed direct exhortation, relying instead on the argument discernible from his actions; for "he taught moderation by revealing himself . . . as a perfect gentleman."³⁰ This education failed to impress itself upon some of Socrates' associates, apparently, for not all of them learned—or if indeed they learned, they did not later remember—what he taught in this way. Since moderation is acquired more by practice than by learning, Strauss explains, the original experience that they had of conversing with Socrates or of observing his manner of conversing with others may have aroused in his interlocutors (or in his listeners) a certain desire for moderation, which, however, was for various reasons subsequently "forgotten by not being acted upon."³¹ To judge from

28 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 143.

29 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 144.

30 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 12.

31 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 13.

what Xenophon remembered of Socrates on this occasion, when he came to sight as indistinguishable from other gentlemen, we infer the meaning of the claim that (his) Socrates never separated his pursuit of wisdom from moderation (*Mem.* 111.9.4)—a claim Strauss often reiterates.³²

4 Socratic Moderation and Wisdom

In his *Symposium*, unlike Plato's, Xenophon has his Socrates discuss the defining virtue of gentlemen—perfect gentlemanliness (*kalokagathia*), being both “noble and good” at once—and from whom (or as a result of what activity) this virtue can be acquired. Midway through the dialogue, however, the conversation turns from gentlemanliness to the beautiful itself, and finally culminates in a compelling Socratic speech on the power of *erōs* over human beings and its usefulness to the *polis*. In contrast to the vivid images of immoderate *erōs* in Plato's *Symposium*, a moderate form of Eros emerges in Xenophon's *Symposium*, a form that Socrates contends can unite friends and lovers in honorable service to each other and to their *polis*. This moderate form of *erōs* is opposed to the private erotic longings that Aristophanes caricatures in Plato's *Symposium*, longings that indirectly or directly (as in the case of Alcibiades) subvert the devotion of individual citizens to the ends of political life. To put this another way, while the *Symposium* of Plato is characterized by a potentially dangerous erotic excess, embodied in the appearance (and sudden disappearance) of an intoxicated, intoxicating Alcibiades, an excess which seems to implicate Socrates as his close companion, the guiding influence of Socrates on the course of the conversation in Xenophon's *Symposium* is both moderate and moderating. Socrates, “availing himself of his natural ascendancy” in speaking, turned attention to beauty and love, and did so in a way that demonstrated his moderation—without entirely obscuring his characteristic pursuit of wisdom, the momentary revelation of which he concealed with laughter. This deed would seem to be why Strauss in one of his enigmatic one-sentence paragraphs considers these to be the three themes of Xenophon's *Symposium*: “‘beauty and love,’ ‘laughter,’ and ‘wisdom.’”³³

Moderation itself appears to come to light at the beginning of the banquet in the modest demeanor of a beautiful youth, Autolykos (*Sym.* 1.8–11). Socratic moderation, on the other hand, is most evident near the end. There, Socrates

32 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 164, 177; (1972 [1998]), 7, 78–9. See Bruell (1998), xiii.

33 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 145, cf. 144, 178 (the first and last of four such sentences).

delivers his encomium to moderate Eros (8.7–41)—a speech which is, according to Strauss, “altogether political” insofar as it seeks to unite those “who are good by nature and long for virtue ambitiously” with care of the *polis*, and which also serves in a deeper sense as Xenophon’s moderate rebuttal to the “transpolitical” Diotima speech delivered by Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*.³⁴ Xenophon’s Socrates, Strauss points out, acts as a “matchmaker” between Callias, his erotically lascivious host,³⁵ and the *polis*. But he “exercises” this notorious, yet seemingly political art only ironically, of course; for the “disreputable art” of political procuring is thoroughly laughable, above all when boasted of by Socrates (see *Sym.* 3.10).³⁶ With respect to Socrates’ procuring speech delivered to Callias and the other gentlemen present when they are deep in their wine-cups, Strauss concludes: “This is precisely his deed performed in fun which is his only deed to speak of.” His speech, therefore, which is itself ironic, is the most playful Socratic deed of the *Symposium*.³⁷

But the most obvious example of Socratic moderation in deed comes after the conclusion of the banquet, when all the married gentlemen present hurried home to their wives, aroused by the Syracusan’s amorous production—all, that is, except Socrates who joined the unmarried men in walking with Autolykos and his father, Lycon (*Sym.* 9.2–7). Socrates thereby demonstrates by this moderate deed what he had sought to teach through his political speech about moderate Eros. But only in an ironic way; thus Strauss concludes in the penultimate sentence of his commentary that Socrates “behaved like an inveterate bachelor” since his “relation to Xanthippe is the comic equivalent of his relation to the city.”³⁸ Nevertheless, the scene immediately following Socrates’ apparently political speech gives the last word to the older gentleman present, Lycon, who first had inquired about the virtue of gentlemanliness (2.4) and now praises the philosopher Socrates as a “person” who seems “both noble and good” (*kalos k’agathos*, 9.1; cf. *Oec.* 6.12). It would appear that Lycon has no quarrel at all with Socrates. But this conclusion is of course ironic, since the gentleman (and father) who is here praising Socrates as a gentleman is

34 Pangle (2010), 140, 150.

35 Strauss presents the case against the debauched Callias elsewhere (1970 [1998]: 157–158). See also Xenophon, *Hellenika* VI.3; Nails (2002), s.v. Callias III.

36 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 176–7, 151, and 160: “The ironical is a kind of the ridiculous.”

37 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 151, 180: “Irony means primarily dissimulation . . . The superior man who is aware of his superiority . . . conceals his superiority. But if his superiority consists in wisdom, his noble dissimulation must consist in concealing his wisdom, . . . presenting himself as less wise than he is.”

38 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 178.

himself the Athenian citizen who two decades later (according to Plato: *Apo.* 23e, 36a) would be one of Socrates' three official accusers at his trial—although Lycon's reasons for bringing charges against Socrates are not stated. Xenophon does not mention Lycon in his accounts of Socrates' trial. Within the limits of this symposium, far from being considered a threat to the authority of conventional gentlemen, Socrates appears to be one gentleman among many. Socratic rhetoric in the *Symposium*, taken as a deed, defends Socrates' justice. But is this political speech to be understood as the playful deed of Socrates above all that Xenophon has in mind as worth remembering?

Of the speeches and deeds—playful or otherwise—in this charming banquet, there are a few, Strauss obliquely argues, that reveal the wisdom of Socrates, a wisdom known to Xenophon but which he abstains from articulating or celebrating explicitly in his writings. One moment is the playful speech by means of which Socrates induces laughter in all those present. In admiring the beauty and grace of the young boy performing dances, Socrates expresses a desire “to learn forms (*ta schemata*)” taught to the boy by his teacher, the Syracusan. When the skeptical teacher asked him “what use” he would make of them, implicitly pointing to the ungraceful physique of the older man, Socrates replied: “I’ll dance, by Zeus!” (*Sym.* 2.16–17) In an apparent paraphrase of the text, Strauss writes: “When he said this, all laughed.” But he goes on to note that “the fact that all laughed does not prove that all laughed for the right reason.” We are encouraged to think that “the right reason” might have something to do neither with the absurdity of the thought that would contrast the awkward, ugly body of Socrates with the supple and graceful body of the dancing boy, nor with the comic image of Socrates contorting his body into dance forms, but rather with its ironic similitude to the kind of solitary private Socratic activity that would entice a young man like Charmides (or Xenophon) to want to learn from and imitate Socrates as precisely as possible (*Sym.* 2.17–19; see Diogenes Laertius II.56).³⁹ Xenophon (who was also present: *Sym.* 1.1) must have laughed with “all” the others at Socrates' playful, yet serious remark—but certainly for a different reason. Socrates, who (we are told by Xenophon) had put on a “solemn face” in reply to their laughter, had not himself laughed.⁴⁰

As for an even more impressively playful deed, though not necessarily done by Socrates, we turn to that deed in Xenophon's *Symposium* that may be said to be the most playful moment in the entire work—if, that is, playfulness in this comedy is judged in terms of the laughter which was induced in *all* of

39 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 147–148. Pangle (2010), 142–3.

40 Nor did Socrates laugh, Strauss suggests, along with the other men at the puerile parody by the envious fool, Philippos (*Sym.* 2.21–23); Strauss (1972 [1998]), 148–9.

the symposiasts, *including* Socrates. This moment of laughter, we are told by Xenophon, happened once and only once at this banquet. Such a “playful deed” would mark the peak of conviviality in the dialogue, and therewith the closest point of amiable rather than hostile contact between the two ways of life that are fundamentally in tension in the dialogue; namely, the way of life of the gentleman and the way of life of Socrates, which in itself may yet be associated with perfect gentlemanship. The friction we might expect between the philosopher and serious gentlemen—as is evident in Aristophanes and Plato—is not allowed by Xenophon to disturb the urbanity of his *Symposium*. The proximity of the two ways of life here unexpectedly and ironically generated more light than heat. This peak represents the high point of the dialogue, provided that a nod is given to the limiting circumstances within which Xenophon has chosen to depict this unusually playful moment.

5 Socrates’ Philosophic Insight and Orientation

But before turning to this playful peak in the dialogue, let us pause once again to consider Xenophon’s Socratic rhetoric. A study of the argument of the action within Xenophon’s Socratic writings reveals that Xenophon, like Socrates, weaves together speech and deed in a manner best described as “Odyssean.”⁴¹ Xenophon, as a young Athenian, observed Socrates sufficiently well to acquire an understanding of the reasons why he proceeded in speech as cautiously as he did. Once the active life yielded to remembrance and contemplation, Xenophon exercised in writing the public art of Socratic rhetoric he had observed. Approaching the *Symposium* through Strauss’ tripartite division of Xenophon’s Socratic writings, we discover perhaps *the* example in all of his works of how the rhetorical character of Socratic speech is to be understood as a *deed*, which in turn has been translated by Xenophon into a manner of writing. Insofar as Strauss, too, imitated the style of Xenophon the task of revealing Strauss’ interpretation of Xenophon and his Socrates becomes inextricably woven into an interpretation of the *Symposium* itself.⁴²

Socratic rhetoric is the inevitable consequence *in deed* of what Socrates himself describes as his “turn” away from the natural philosophy or natural science, dominated by the pre-Socratic effort to discover a unifying principle that explains the whole, on the one hand, and the sophistic pursuit of rhetoric as power, on the other. His turn towards examinations of “the human things,”

41 *Mem.* IV.6.13–15; Strauss (1972 [1998]), 164.

42 Rosen (1973), 470; see Gish (2003).

while it does not preclude inquiries into nature (*physiologia*), as implied in Socrates' illuminating but brief exchange with the Syracusan (*Sym.* 7.4–10; see *Mem.* 1.1.11–13, IV.7.4–7, but cf. 1.1.16), compels Socrates to situate his studies in a way that both acknowledges essential distinctions and restrains rhetoric; distinguishing the human from the divine, for example, or as Strauss remarks, separating “terrestrial things . . . from heavenly or divine ones.”⁴³ In other words, Socratic rhetoric necessarily attends the second sailing of philosophy. But even in this rhetorical mode, Socrates “never ceased considering what each of the beings is,” whether together with his companions, or “silently” to himself “in the midst of his companions” (*Mem.* IV.6.1). Here at the “peak” of the fourth book of his “recollections,” Strauss argues, “Xenophon points to the center of Socrates' life—a center of which he does not speak owing to the limitations he has imposed on himself especially in the *Memorabilia*.”⁴⁴ To articulate the extent of Socrates' inquiries into “the beings” (*ta onta*) would defeat the purpose of that work: “The Socrates of the bulk of the *Memorabilia* is *phronimos* but not *sophos*: the concealment of Socrates' *sophia* is the defense of Socrates.”⁴⁵ The Socrates of the *Memorabilia* appears as a law-abiding Athenian, thus demonstrating his justice because his deeds are constituted by a “safe” conduct in his manner of speaking. “The Odyssean kind of dialectics is characteristic of the good citizen,” observes Strauss, “but the good citizen . . . is not the same as a wise man doing the work peculiar to the wise man. It makes sense to call the Odyssean dialectics [exercised by Socrates and Xenophon] rhetoric.”⁴⁶

Bearing this orientation in mind, we are able to see how Xenophon's Socrates transcends the Socrates of Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. In that work, Socrates' consideration of what each of the beings is regards, for the most part, only the human things. Hence at the beginning Xenophon characterized Socrates' conversations as limited to gentlemanly concerns: what is piety, nobility, justice, moderation, courage, a *polis*, and ruling, “as well as about the other things, knowledge of which he believed makes one a gentleman.” (*Mem.* 1.1.16) According to Xenophon, this turn in Socrates' inquiries focuses on human beings, and hence the human soul, against the background of his natural examinations, leading to sustained reflection on “the human things” and especially the limitations of being human, since it would be a kind of “madness” to neglect such limits and to seek the kind of definitive knowledge of the whole that could be possessed—if at all—only by the gods (*Mem.* 1.1.6–15).

43 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 170.

44 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 116–7, alternative manuscript reading.

45 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 120, see 106.

46 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 122–3.

But this “turn” or re-orientation further suggests, by calling attention to the human things as eminently worthy of consideration among the manifold beings available to inquiry within the whole, that knowledge of “what each of the beings is” within that whole (rather than knowledge of what the sophists call “cosmos”; see I.1.11: “how it is, and which necessities are responsible for the coming to be of each of the heavenly [or divine] things”) ultimately depends upon recognizing the essential heterogeneity of the beings that are and that can be known by human beings.

This principle of “noetic heterogeneity” is the governing insight of Xenophon’s Socrates, as well as Plato’s, according to Strauss. Xenophon’s Socrates “never ceased considering” as well as separating out and dividing things in speech, according to their “tribes” or kinds (*Mem.* 1.4.13; IV.5.12, 6.1; cf. *Oec.* 9.6–7). But this examination of the intelligible natures of things (what each of the beings is) was circumscribed by moderation—that is, by a “sane and sober” inquiry into human affairs, above all political affairs, as distinguished from “all beings strictly understood.” Unlike all preceding philosophers, who neglect the human things as such, Socrates “sees the core of the whole, or of nature, in noetic heterogeneity . . . [that is,] essential heterogeneity. It is for this reason that Socrates founded political science,” or political philosophy, the study of the human things as a discrete class within the whole. For Xenophon, Socrates’ insight into the character of the whole as consisting of distinct, intelligible classes or kinds “permits one to let things be what they are,” thus vindicating “the natural origins of philosophy in everyday life” by reflecting upon the “what is” questions, beginning with—but not exhausted by—the examinations regarding the human things, knowledge of which seems to constitute perfect gentlemanliness. With this rebirth of “common sense,” Socrates, according to Strauss, considered his discovery of essential noetic heterogeneity and his turn to the human things to be “a return from madness to sanity or sobriety, or, to use the Greek term, *sophrosynê*, which I would translate as moderation.”⁴⁷

After his turn, Socrates altered his pursuit of wisdom not only *in speech*—by examining what others (that is, sophists and philosophers before Socrates) had previously neglected or taken for granted, but also *in deed*, adopting a moderate or sane art of conversation with human beings, the resulting conversations themselves being predicated on distinguishing *in thought* the human soul as a kind distinct from all other beings. Strauss indicates in his commentary, by his constant attention to the character or nature of each of Socrates’ interlocutors, that the turn occasioned by the discovery of the principle of noetic heterogeneity guided not only his mode of examining all the beings but also his

47 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 170–2, 163.

manner of conversing in accordance with the diversity of individual souls within that kind (*Mem.* IV.6.1). Socrates thus spoke moderately both in public and in private, as the *Symposium* makes clear, limiting his conversations (if not his examinations) according to the nature of his particular interlocutor as well as by the human, or political, things. “The human or political things,” Strauss insists, “are indeed the clue to all things, to the whole of nature, since they are the link or bond between the highest and the lowest.”⁴⁸ For Socrates (and Xenophon), “the transpolitical life is higher in dignity than the political life,” and yet the claims of the *polis* and of political life, including those salutary opinions connected with politics as the horizon for examining the human questions, must be treated with due respect. (Xenophon thus refrains from having his Socrates raise or participate in examining the question “What is law?”)⁴⁹ This is the essence of Socratic moderation. To deny the political things their due in the pursuit of wisdom would be a peculiar form of madness, and “Socrates, Xenophon says, did not separate from each other wisdom and moderation.”⁵⁰

The decisive Socratic turn, with its critical foregrounding of the human things, obscures the question of whether or how Socrates returned to his “preoccupation” with the study of natural phenomena.⁵¹ But the discovery of the essential intelligibility and place of the human, above all political, things within the order of the whole does not preclude trans-political, natural, and theological investigations. For to say that Socrates conversed “always” about human things—“by raising the ‘what is’ questions regarding them”—is not to say that he spoke or thought *only* about this class of beings. Examining such questions as “What is noble, and what is base?” or “What is a city, and what is a political man?” inevitably leads to other inquiries, such as “What is a human being?” and “What is mind or soul?”—questions that point beyond themselves to considerations of the relation between human beings and the (other) kinds of beings manifest in the whole; and perhaps further, to a consideration of how these questions stand in relation to “the still more fundamental” yet immoderate question, *quid sit deus*, which neither Xenophon nor his Socrates are ever presented as raising in speech.⁵²

48 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 164.

49 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 14–15; cf. *Mem.* I.2.39–47.

50 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 177, see 163–4.

51 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 140.

52 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 8; see Strauss (1975 [1983]), 122.

What is absent or passed over in silence, however, is not simply forgotten, especially that which is held dear.⁵³ As Strauss observes (commenting on *Mem.* iv.6.1), “Xenophon no longer says as he had said near the beginning of the work (I.1.16) that Socrates raised the ‘what is’ questions regarding the human things only.”⁵⁴ Despite the fact that Xenophon provides precious few examples in his writings of Socrates considering the beings “according to their kinds,” his silence regarding what Socrates did or said (or thought) in private (cf. I.6.14) does not deny the possibility that Socrates thought and conversed about “the nature of all things” with some of his companions; Xenophon only stipulates that Socrates did not converse about all the beings “in the way most of the others did” (I.1.11). This stipulation suggests, according to Strauss, that Socratic thought is, or rather remains, characterized by a “constant preoccupation” with “what is” simply, that is, “with the essence of all things.” The inquiries that constitute this “chief preoccupation” would be, in the decisive sense, the “peak” of Xenophon’s presentation of Socrates. Xenophon however only “points to that peak . . . he does not supply it. The peak is missing.”⁵⁵ By constructing his arguments so as to point toward a peak without presenting it, Xenophon refrains from writing merely vulgar comedy; he insists on recognizing and preserving in his writing the integrity of the high by not attempting to make what is high visible only from the perspective, or in the light, of what is low: “the very meaning of the high,” in Strauss’ reading of Xenophon’s rhetoric, “is that it is *not* reducible to or explicable in terms of the low.”⁵⁶ “This formula,” Strauss asserts, “can be applied to Xenophon’s Socratic writings as a whole. The highest does not become visible or audible, but it can be divined. The unsaid is more important than what is said.”⁵⁷

Socratic rhetoric, particularly in pursuit of knowledge about perfect gentlemanliness, can be seen at work in Socrates’ playful deeds and speeches in Xenophon’s *Symposium*, as well as in the composition of the dialogue itself. The rhetorical principle governing the *Symposium*, like the post-turn activity of Socrates, is animated by an awareness of the unique character of the

53 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 73–4, 171, 92, 93.

54 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 117.

55 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 170–1.

56 Pangle (2006), 93–94.

57 Strauss (1958 [1996]), 170. The paragraph that concludes Strauss’ discussion of the missing peak advising readers to be “extremely attentive” is immediately followed by the paragraph in which Strauss suddenly shifts attention to the “most important” of all the passages “in which Xenophon subtly alludes to Socrates’ chief preoccupation,” his “constant” consideration of what each of the beings is. See Strauss (1966), Lecture 15, 3–5 (on “Xenophon’s deliberate avoidance of heights”).

human soul within the natural order of the whole, and by the necessary consequence in *speech* and in *deed* (if not also in *thought*) of the fundamental insight that had occasioned Socrates' turn itself. This consequence is articulated by Xenophon, when considering the virtues that he had named as the topics of Socrates' inquiries into the human things: that wisdom, and the pursuit of wisdom, must not be separated from the exercise of moderation (*Mem.* III.9.4).

Reading the Socratic writings of Xenophon, unlike those of Plato, we do not see Socrates made to appear as young and beautiful. Xenophon presents Socrates in a rhetorical manner that will hardly persuade most readers to fall in love with the Socratic life of philosophy. The rhetoric of Xenophon instead creates for us a portrait of Socrates composed of discreet episodes, it seems, which, taken together, form the circumscribing line of a Euclidean circle always anchored by its attachment to a hidden center. The words and deeds of his Socrates are thus rendered intelligible and beautiful by a perspective, or principle, which itself must remain unseen and unstated. This rhetorical strategy imbues Xenophon's writing, patterned on his Socrates' way of speaking, with a sober prudence. With this as an introduction to the author's Socratic rhetoric, we turn now to discover what we can learn from the visible center of Xenophon's *Symposium*, namely, the most playful deed in the dialogue.

6 The Mutual Laughter of the Philosopher and Gentlemen

Xenophon in his *Symposium* reveals Socrates at ease conversing privately and playfully with certain companions and other gentlemen. Enlivened by wine, music, and a convivial setting, the conversations recorded in the *Symposium* range across several Socratic themes—from beauty and wisdom, to perfect gentlemanliness and *erōs*. While it is animated throughout by a playful *agōn* between the representatives of philosophy and the gentlemen present, the expected tension between the philosophic life and that of conventional gentlemen is not openly presented here by Xenophon, just as it does not appear in the conversation with Ischomachos in the *Oeconomicus*. One of the ways Socrates prudently conceals this rivalry or contest is by seeking to moderate his fellow symposiasts and by finding common ground between representatives of both ways of life. Laughter, which Strauss suggests is the central theme of the dialogue, is one manifestation of an apparent agreement or harmony between philosophy and gentlemanliness (*Sym.* 1.16, 2.17, 3.10). But the most playful moment in the banquet is the spontaneous outburst of laughter by all of the symposiasts that occurs at the center of the *Symposium*.

In reply to Antisthenes' proud speech in defense of his poverty, which he has interpreted as a kind of wealth derived from his association with Socrates (4.34–44), and which Strauss notes is “the central speech in the chapter,” Callias, their host, swears a paradoxical oath—*his* fifth and last, but the *central* oath of the *Symposium*, which also marks the beginning of the second half of the dialogue.⁵⁸ With his oath Callias calls attention to the sophistic inversion of the weaker into the stronger speech that Charmides and Antisthenes appear to have accomplished in their defense speeches regarding their respective interpretation of poverty as a kind of wealth—interpretations both have attributed to (their association with) Socrates (4.45). The Aristophanean portrait of Socrates as a sophist and a teacher of sophistic rhetoric is suggested. As a wealthy gentleman who has paid more money to sophists than any other Athenian (Pl. *Apo.* 20a), Callias recognizes a sophistic art of rhetoric; as Strauss says: “Callias is not impressed by [Antisthenes'] reasoning but refutes his would-be refuter, whom he apostrophizes as ‘sophist.’”⁵⁹ In reply to Antisthenes, Callias feigns envy and swearing by Hera pretends to be convinced, promising to relinquish his own wealth in favor of the wealth advocated by the self-proclaimed Socratics. With his proposed exchange of traditional for Socratic wealth—“and the most exquisite possession that goes with it, namely, leisure”—Callias implicitly denies the premise of his earlier argument (that need is what leads to injustice) and explicitly rejects the self-sacrificing aspect of his own boast to use his kind of wealth to help others escape necessity, for he now claims to want to be poor—like Socrates—so that he can be free from the demands of conventional justice. Since we have reasons to doubt even his initial claim to use wealth to benefit others and to do justice, Callias' ironic remark only reveals the truth he previously concealed, that Callias is much less concerned with justice than with having a tyrannical license to do whatever he wants. Strauss argues here that this exchange makes clear that all the gentlemen present in the *Symposium* are not gentlemen in the same sense, just as “Xenophon makes clear in the central chapter of the *Oeconomicus*” where the contrast of the philosopher and an outstanding gentleman is made explicit. But such an open confrontation is “most unsuitable” in the setting of the *Symposium*.⁶⁰

Whether or not any of the other symposiasts take seriously his renunciation of pride in his conventional wealth, Callias' intervention, as Strauss remarks, nonetheless “enables” Niceratus, another Athenian gentleman present, who

58 The central sections (4.41–42) occur in Antisthenes' speech. Strauss (1972 [1998]), 158.

59 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 152.

60 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 156–8.

had expressed pride in his knowledge of Homer, to be bold in offering a playful defense, or justification, of gentlemen and their traditional wealth.⁶¹ Niceratus offers that defense, strikingly, with reference to what he has learned or claims to have learned from Homer, in contrast to what Antisthenes and Charmides claimed to have learned from Socrates (4.45):

“But by Zeus,” said Niceratus, “don’t be envious [of their wealth]; I at least am going to come near him as one who borrows this ‘being in need of nothing,’ for having learned from Homer how to count . . . I never cease eagerly desiring the most wealth; because of these things perhaps to some I also seem to be someone who is a lover-of-the-most-possession.”

Xenophon remarks: “At this, everyone burst out laughing, believing that he had said the things that are (*ta onta*).” Niceratus’ playful and self-deprecating rebuke of Callias, for his feigned envy of the self-professed Socratics, serves as a comic *apologia* on behalf of gentlemanly wealth and Homeric poetry. But it is an ironically playful-serious moment. In an improvised moment of wit, he has disclosed the deleterious effect of an Homeric education which produces in gentlemen an all-consuming desire to acquire, a defect which may in fact have nothing at all to do with Homer. The “hidden meaning” (*hyponoia*, 3.6) of the Homeric verses recited from memory by a slightly intoxicated Niceratus may have eluded his grasp as well as that of his fellow symposiasts. On the acquisitiveness of such men, Strauss elaborates: Niceratus had “learned from Homer to count his gifts exactly; he quotes the verses from the *Iliad* in which Agamemnon enumerated exactly the lavish gifts with which he was willing to appease Achilles’ wrath; he has learned from Homer to count, to count money exactly, and thus perhaps to be rather too fond of money.” In its proper context, Agamemnon’s lines fall flat of course because Achilles there indignantly rejects the kind of conventional wealth later sought by Athenian gentlemen.⁶²

Xenophon, in a characteristically brief editorial remark, reports that “everyone” laughed at this playful statement by Niceratus, a joke sufficiently self-deprecating as not to come across too obviously as what it really is—a quiet rebuke of the indigence of Antisthenes and Charmides as unmanly and ungentelemanly. Whether or not he had intended to inspire complete laughter, this is the only time the banqueters laugh in this chapter. Niceratus therefore shares with Socrates the distinction of inspiring laughter among *all* of the gentlemen at the *Symposium*; or, to put it more provocatively, insofar as he is also

61 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 159.

62 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 159; Homer, *Iliad* 9.122–23, cf. 9.264–5.

laughing at himself, Niceratus alone has the honor of saying something that makes everyone laugh, including Socrates—this is the *only* occasion in a banquet memorable for its deeds when we know that indeed “everyone” was made to laugh.

But why did Socrates join the Socratics and the gentlemen in laughing? Ironically, on the two prior occasions of general laughter, both of which he himself inspired, Socrates, we are told by Xenophon, maintained his composure and refused to join in the laughter. Even as everyone else burst out laughing (2.17), Socrates put on a serious look. When he moves the symposiasts to laughter again with his ridiculous statement that he takes great pride in an art of procuring (3.10), Socrates takes care to attend his remark with a very solemn look. Here we notice a slight hint of disapproval on the part of some, for Xenophon refrains from explicitly attesting that “everyone” laughed; he merely reports that “they laughed at him”—but the silence of Autolycos and Lycon may be inferred from the bawdy character of the joke. When Socrates begins to defend this art of procuring in terms of its usefulness in acquiring money, Lycon quickly intervenes to change the topic by turning the attention of the symposiasts to the other foolish one among them who makes his living simply from causing laughter (3.10–11). However this may be with Lycon and his son, we can hardly include Socrates among those who reportedly laughed.

If we return to the one time Socrates joined in the convivial laughter, we wonder: Why? Does he laugh for the reason stated by Xenophon—namely, the sudden and comic revelation by the unsuspecting Niceratus of *what is (ta onta)*? And if so, which (if any) of the others (including Xenophon, who claims to be present) are laughing for the same reason as Socrates—that is, for “the right reason”? While he speaks playfully, Xenophon’s Socrates rarely laughs: “for only the second time in all of Xenophon’s Socratic writings, where he has caused us to laugh more than a few times, Socrates laughed.”⁶³ But only once are we explicitly told that he did so. “It is true that Xenophon does not say here [*Symposium*] explicitly that Socrates laughed, as he does in the *Apology of Socrates* (28), but Socrates belongs to the ‘all’ who laughed, does he not?” Strauss continues to expand the point: “Socrates never laughs in the

63 Bruell (1994), xxii. See Strauss (1970 [1998]), 191n6: “In the *Memorabilia* only one case occurs in which Socrates is said to have made people laugh (IV.2.5); in the *Oeconomicus*, Socrates himself notes three cases of this kind (II.9, VII.3, XVII.10).” On Socratic jesting, in relation to the *Symposium*, see *Mem.* I.3.8–13 (Xenophon, the beautiful) and III. 11.15–16 (Socrates, having a partner). Plato’s Socrates laughed *only once*, in the face of the death that his companions feared (*Phaedo* 84d, 115c). Xenophon and Plato agree that Socrates prefers laughter (comedy) to weeping (tragedy). Plato indulged *his* taste for tragedy; Xenophon did not. Bruell (1987), 92.

Oeconomicus or in the *Memorabilia*, although he jests there not infrequently, not to say always.” The final four words attest to the Aristophanean mode adopted in part by Xenophon.⁶⁴ In this, the most playful of all his writings, Xenophon neither explicitly calls attention to the rare fact of Socratic laughter, nor conceals it. On that sole occasion when Socrates is *explicitly* said to have laughed (an occasion reported by Xenophon second-hand, since he was absent at the time from Athens), the circumstances must be understood from a conventional perspective to be the *least* playful setting of his Socratic works. The paradox of Socratic laughter in the face of death is compounded by the fact that it arises out of the failure of his most enthusiastic companions to understand that, for those whom the life of philosophy has prepared for death, to be condemned to die by a *polis* is not tragic. A dim-witted youth’s lament that Socrates is being executed “unjustly” (rather than “justly”) is, as Strauss wittily notes in commenting on Niceratus in the *Symposium*, “a touching manifestation of silliness” that induced Socrates to laugh.⁶⁵

Seeing how rare Socratic laughter is in Xenophon, we are all the more eager to learn what causes it here. Xenophon reports that the laughter was stimulated by the (unexpected) revelation of “the things that are” through Niceratus’ remark about Homer. We doubt all those who laughed understood “what is” in the same way, or laughed for the same reason as Socrates. One meaning of *ta onta* suggests that, for those gentlemen who are present at least, the words would translate as “property” or “possessions” (*Sym.* 4.14, 4.47).⁶⁶ What is laughable for Socrates may come to light only once Niceratus’ speech is seen as a kind of revelatory deed: the acquisitive gentleman is unwittingly playing the role of a “self-worked philosopher” (*Sym.* 1.5), stumbling in speech on an articulation of *what is* (cf. 2.19). Even though his speech unintentionally grasps the truth with respect to his kind (conventional gentlemen), it is not likely recognized as such by Niceratus or the other gentlemen present, who laugh at the obviously absurd thought that a “most possessions-loving” gentleman would renounce his property (and his beloved poet) to pursue Socratic wealth. The fundamental disagreement between the philosopher and traditional gentlemen has been for a moment glimpsed here in the underlying thought or hidden meaning (3.6) conveyed by a playful, yet serious *logos* that simultaneously reveals and conceals. With respect to the cause of Socrates’ laughter here Strauss proposes a sequence of provocative questions; the central one points

64 Strauss (1963), 109–110; (1972 [1998]), 139–40, 159, 162.

65 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 162. Niceratus’ remark, while another kind of silliness, is for him tragic; see Nails (2002), s.v. Niceratus 11. See also *Hellenika* 11.3.56, and Higgins (1977), 12–13.

66 See Xen. *Oec.* 2.3; Bartlett (1996), 44n5: “Every instance of ‘property’ in the text is *ta onta*.”

to the opposition between the “teaching” of Socrates as opposed to Homer’s and is followed by a hint of what that teaching might be by wondering, albeit briefly, if Socrates laughed “about the hidden thought (*hyponoia*) underlying the counting” learned by Niceratus from Homer.⁶⁷

Of course, whatever Socrates may think of the insatiable acquisitiveness of gentlemen or the education to acquisitiveness by their poet (Homer as the teacher of *pleonexia* to tyrants), his reasons for laughing are obscured or concealed by the general laughter of the others. And yet, his laughter—far from being simple agreement (*homonoia*) with the gentlemen and non-gentlemen present—corresponds to an indictment by the philosopher not only of the apparent lesson learned from Homer, but also of the grave insufficiency in the gentleman’s grasp of “what is,” that is, on what properly speaking constitutes genuine “property” for human beings, not to mention *to onta*. If knowledge of the beings (the-things-that-are, or what is) is reduced to knowledge of numbers assigned to material objects—as is the implied cause of Socrates’ laughter at Niceratus’ remark according to Strauss—then, it would seem, all possessions for human beings can be accumulated and counted in the manner of Homer. Insofar as conventional gentlemen rest secure in this view of wealth and the sufficiency of their way of life, they share in the “madness” of certain natural philosophers who seemed unaware of their insufficient understanding of the whole. As a result, they expect—as the sophists did—to derive benefits (material possessions) from knowledge as merely an instrumental good. Such gentlemen assume an intelligibility or order of the whole that remains unexamined and their approach to the whole must be contrasted with that of Socrates, who, according to Xenophon, holds that, for true wealth to be had by human beings, it suffices “to understand in what way each of the beings of this sort comes to be” rather than to make use of knowledge to acquire more (*Mem.* 1.1.15–16; cf. 2.10, 3.10, 4.56–61, 7.2–3; cf. 2.16–19, 8.12).

Even if this critique, or something like it, is what Socrates had in mind when he laughed along with the others at Niceratus’ tongue-in-cheek rejection of his Homeric education regarding property (*ta onta*) as deficient, the seemingly harmonious convivial setting is not disturbed by it. After his provocative consideration of the causes of Socratic laughter Strauss subtly takes note of the hidden tension in this moment, and the need to move past it rather quickly: “What is perhaps equally remarkable as that all laughed at this point is that

67 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 159–60. See *Mem.* 111.7.6; *Oec.* 8.17–10.1, esp. 9.2–7, where the “tribe” of seven is taken as the underlying ordering principle of the “teaching” of Ischomachos: Strauss (1970 [1998]), 146–52. Strauss’ final question—“Are the beings numbers?”—in keeping with the near silence of Xenophon’s sober Socrates, passes almost unnoticed.

none laughs any more in the rest of the *Symposium*; any further laughter would be anticlimactic." Thus, in the waning playfulness of the symposium what follows in the dialogue "is characterized by the greatest seriousness compatible with the circumstances." Once the general laughter subsides, the peak of playful contact between the philosopher and gentlemen—in which an underlying tension between them is also revealed—has passed. Strauss' transition captures the turn in the dialogue's tone: "The debauch of general laughter—of the laughter in which Socrates had joined—calls for redress." It is for this reason that Xenophon (that is, the unnamed "someone" at 4.46) redirects attention away from Niceratus, and his inadvertent revelation of what is, towards "the serious, very serious Hermogenes," whose love of gentlemanliness (8.3) returns the dialogue explicitly to the (potentially) common ground shared by the conventional gentlemen and those who practice philosophy.⁶⁸ Gentlemanliness, or the longing for "the noble and the good" (*kalokagathia*), again comes to light as a desire shared by all those present at the symposium—in one way or another. However, essential to the Socratic conception of perfect gentlemanliness (as Hermogenes' speech, which Socrates does not refute, suggests) must be "knowledge of things other than the human things."⁶⁹ The kind of examination that may lead to such knowledge may be here suggested by the strictly private, seemingly "mad" dancing of Xenophon's Socrates.

In harmony with the laughter of the other gentlemen, Socrates' laughter in the *Symposium* passes almost unnoticed—as do his reasons for laughing. Socrates offers no comment on what Niceratus has said and it goes without saying that no one is moved to ask Socrates why he laughed, since "everyone" was laughing all at once. Earlier in the symposium certain Socratic reasons had been revealed by challenges raised to his speeches by Charmides, Antisthenes, and Hermogenes, as well as by Callias and Lycon. But here, on the sole occasion of his joining the others in laughter, Socrates' reasons for doing so, his silent deliberations, must remain unknown to the other gentlemen and Socratics who were present—with perhaps one exception. Xenophon, in his art of writing, quietly calls our attention to this rare laughter and thus bids us wonder, as Strauss himself does in his commentary, about the hidden thought of Socrates. As the

68 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 160.

69 Bruell (1987), 108–9. Hermogenes seems of central importance to the portrait of Socrates in Xenophon's Socratic writings (*Apo.* 2–28; *Sym.* 1.3; *Mem.* 1.2.48). Hermogenes here argues that "the gods" who he claims are his intimate friends are in full possession of *taonta*. For reasons of his own Socrates here pronounces the gods too to be lovers of perfect gentlemanliness; together these speeches, Xenophon concludes, were "in this way . . . seriously spoken" (4.49).

Symposium begins its descent from the playful to the serious following this missing peak, which is pointed to but not made explicit by Xenophon as author, we become all the more attentive to the underlying tension in the dialogue. We recall here what Strauss had said about Xenophon's art of writing in his earlier lectures on Socrates—but which he now leaves unsaid: "The highest does not become visible or audible, but it can be divined. The unsaid is more important than what is said. For the reader this means that he must be extremely attentive, or extremely careful."⁷⁰ Strauss' own commentary demonstrates that the exhortation to read Xenophon's *Symposium* with care is sage advice.

7 Socratic Rhetoric and the Philosophic Life

Xenophon, in the opening line of his *Symposium*, expresses his intention to make evident why the playful deeds of gentlemen are worth remembering. Socrates appears in this dialogue as almost indistinguishable from the other gentlemen who are present. But we know from his other writings—both Socratic and 'non-Socratic'—that Xenophon held Socrates in the highest esteem. The radical contrast between Socrates and conventional gentlemen, according to Strauss, comes to sight in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*. But the difference is also subtly present in the *Symposium*. The charming yet elusive character of the work, and of Xenophon's writing, may be judged from the fact that the most outward sign of agreement between Socrates and the other gentlemen—a moment of shared laughter—implies even as it restrains the harsh indictment of the unexamined life of the conventional gentleman from the perspective of philosophy. Socrates' laughter on this occasion is deeply ironic, just as his deeds are playful. The underlying thoughts or reasons that induced his laughter remain unspoken. Here as elsewhere in his writings, Xenophon conceals the wisdom of the philosopher while nonetheless pointing in a moderate way towards that very wisdom, and thus to the superiority of the Socratic life. In other words, Xenophon as author hides his high esteem for Socrates out in the open but in such a manner as to prevent both Xenophon and his Socrates from being maligned by those who do not know philosophy and would take offense at the judgment in favor of philosophy over the life of the conventional gentleman. Strauss therefore insists that as we read the *Symposium* "we must not forget the invisible and inaudible Xenophon, for he too is a lover . . . of Socrates."⁷¹

⁷⁰ Strauss (1958 [1996]), 170.

⁷¹ Strauss (1972 [1998]), 171.

Xenophon's Socrates then does not seem, after all, to be central to the *Symposium* since the philosophic way of life he embodies emerges only in a liminal way. Yet as author Xenophon manages over the course of the dialogue both to draw distinctions between Socrates himself and those who appear to live as caricatures of philosophy, on one hand, and to make philosophy and gentlemanliness appear compatible, on the other hand. In this regard Socrates' persuasive speech before the gentleman Lycon seems to reconcile the two rival ways of life. But this speech occurs near the end of the work when the action of the dialogue has already passed its peak and the wine has been flowing among the banqueters for some time. Thus this ostensible reconciliation occurs only after Xenophon has contrived to have the inherent tension between these rival ways of life, and their diverse representatives, brought to our attention in the dialogue.

As the banquet proceeds late into the evening, the *Symposium* declines into various forms of convivial misbehavior, and a "greater seriousness" threatens to taint the setting and speeches of the banqueters. In particular, an abrupt and abusive remark by the sober Syracusan, the teacher of the performing boy and girl whom Socrates earlier had playfully invited to teach him as well, now envious of the lack of attention paid to his performers, disrupts the playful setting. Imitating some accusations derived from Aristophanes' *Clouds*, that Socrates allegedly is "a thinker of the things aloft" and "measures a flea's jump in terms of a flea's feet", the Syracusan appears to be rebuking Socrates with his charges—to which Socrates, surprisingly, confesses.⁷² Strauss pauses to note Socrates' admission of intellectual audacity: "He grants him that he indeed runs the risk of being, as the Syracusan says, a thinker," whom the comic poet had mocked for his inquiry into physiological "wonders" of nature; that is, the examinations of natural phenomena conducted by the 'pre-Socratic' Socrates. In his reply, Socrates "wonders" not at the basis of the charges, but whether the aim of the Syracusan to please those for whom he performs can be achieved by the "far-fetched wonders" that he teaches his young students to perform. Strauss, in his commentary, emphasizes the philosophic tone of Socrates' advice to the serious Syracusan: "if someone wants to look at wonders, he has only to wonder at what is right at hand." Socrates elaborates on his observation by referring the Syracusan's attention to a consideration of certain natural wonders, while reminding him that a playful symposium is an ill-suited setting to display such inquiries. It is worth noting that "Socrates does not say that these 'physiological'

72 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 168–9; Bruell (1987), 108.

questions are not serious or beyond man's reach," comments Strauss, "but that they are too serious for a drinking party."⁷³

Socrates, nonetheless, in his elaboration of his thought would seem to have violated his own advice. His momentary digression on the wonderful, yet seemingly contradictory properties of liquids, like olive oil and water, as well as the reflective but not illuminating quality of bronze (*Sym.* 7.4), draws aside the veil to give us a glimpse of the kind of examinations that would seem a serious and significant aspect of his concern with the intelligible beings. Socrates' immoderate philosophizing here could be taken as tantamount to a confession, were it not for the facts that he restricts his physiological questions to a consideration of terrestrial wonders and that he then returns immediately to the salutary properties of wine and dancing, intoxication and the beautiful (7.5, see 2.24–26, with 2.1–2, 2.8–9, and 2.15–19, but cf. 3.1–2). Above all, Socrates' digression is paradoxically fitting. His bold (not to say brazen) reference to this kind of philosophical inquiry, just at this moment in the *Symposium*, seems ironically justified. For it is precisely here, with the playfulness of the banquet enlivened by wine-drinking and the tempers of the gentlemen subdued by the waning hours of night, that such an audacious speech could be overlooked or dismissed as harmless by those present (and awake: cf. Plato, *Sym.* 223b–d), especially intoxicated gentlemen who may (or may not) be listening. Socrates' audacity *in speech* thus can be excused in a way as being prompted by his drinking wine, despite his reputation for extraordinary continence. More importantly, according to Strauss it is only here in the *Symposium*, perhaps in all of Xenophon's Socratic writings, that such an acknowledgement of the extent of Socrates' philosophizing would be appropriate; for "he who never speaks of this kind of question in the other Socratic writings of Xenophon, speaks of them in an advanced stage of a drinking party where a greater *parrhêsia* is in order than elsewhere." Socrates' thought, then, argues Strauss, "nay, his whole wisdom can be shown without disguise only 'in fun'; so close is the connection between wisdom and laughter." Xenophon's Socrates, in other words, indulges his desire to speak seriously about and thus partly to disclose the radical nature of his pursuit of knowledge according to distinct kinds of beings, including his examinations in natural philosophy, which must constitute a significant portion of what has remained his "constant preoccupation," namely, his concern—which has never ceased, according to Xenophon—with examining "what is" (*ta onta*). In this subtle and charming way, the "bashful" Xenophon points to the hidden peak of Socratic thought, allowing us to glimpse, if only for a moment, the kind of philosophic activity that partly constitutes the Socratic life, which

73 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 169.

otherwise could not have been shown unconcealed by an ironic playfulness.⁷⁴ The Syracusan, too, it must be said, seems satisfied with the fittingness of Socrates' rhetoric (8.1).

On this reading of the *Symposium*, which Strauss' commentary on the dialogue presents and which represents Xenophon's Socrates' rhetoric as his deed *par excellence*, it also should go without saying that the one banqueter and intimate to whom this confession and *apologia* are addressed is none other than the mysterious Syracusan who Strauss—in the final, enigmatic, one-sentence paragraph that concludes his commentary on Xenophon's *Symposium*—intimates is none other than Xenophon himself, the student of Socrates who alone may be his rival in rhetoric, if not also in wisdom.⁷⁵ This intimation is confirmed, if not fully disclosed, by reflection upon the final pages of *Xenophon's Socrates*—the brief "Appendix" on the life and "fatherland" of Xenophon that concludes, in perhaps the best way possible under such playful circumstances, Strauss' interpretation of Xenophon's Socratic writings as a whole.⁷⁶

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74 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 170. Plato's Socrates acknowledges this preoccupation to his companions only in the private setting of his prison on the last day of his life in Athens: *Phaedo* 96a–100c.

75 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 178.

76 Strauss (1972 [1998]), 179–80; see Strauss (1975 [1983]), the published title for which is deceptive ("*anabasis*" referring as equally to the author as to his work). See also Bruell (1984), 99–100; Bruell (1987). My examination of Xenophon's Socrates and Leo Strauss has benefited from discussions over many years with the friend to whom it is dedicated: *In memoriam*—Laurence D. Nee (1971–2013).

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Strauss on the *Memorabilia*: Xenophon's Socrates

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Leo Strauss devotes most of *Xenophon's Socrates* to a detailed analysis of the *Memorabilia*, the longest, most complex, and most beautiful of Xenophon's four Socratic works.¹ By carefully compiling many short Socratic speeches and dialogues, Xenophon demonstrates in the *Memorabilia* that Socrates was a model teacher and human being who adorned his city by improving the people around him. The *Memorabilia* opens with a refutation of the two official charges against Socrates (impiety and corruption of the youth) and concludes with a glance at Socrates' approach to his trial and a final eulogy. Xenophon begins and ends, then, by discussing Socrates' trial—including attention to his controversial *daimonion* (which looks like fairly strong evidence against Socrates on the charge that he introduced new *daimonia*). This focus on Socrates' *daimonion* is probably what prompts Strauss to observe that the work is an unusual piece of forensic rhetoric, in that it shows its vulnerabilities at the beginning and end, while placing in the (large) middle section its most publicly acceptable part, an account of Socrates' benefactions (4, 58).

In *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse*, the first of his two volumes laying out his “complete” interpretation of Xenophon's Socrates, Strauss explains why he begins with an examination of Xenophon's dialogue on household management, the *Oeconomicus*, rather than with the *Memorabilia* (Strauss 1970, 85, cf. Strauss 1972, preface). There he argues that Xenophon limits himself in the *Memorabilia* to speaking about Socrates' justice. Even if this were strictly speaking true (for the *Memorabilia* does discuss Socrates' wisdom, among other virtues), the definition of justice under consideration in the *Memorabilia*

1 I thank Robert Bartlett and Timothy Burns for suggesting improvements to this essay. I am much indebted to Christopher Bruell's work on Strauss and Xenophon (1984, 1994, 1998), especially his “Foreword” (1998) to the reprints of Leo Strauss' final two books on Xenophon, *Xenophon's Socrates* (Strauss 1972) and *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse* (Strauss 1970). Translations of the *Memorabilia* are from my edition (Bonnette 1994), with occasional unnoted changes. For translations of Xenophon's other Socratic writings I recommend Bartlett (1996). Further helpful commentary on the *Memorabilia* can be found in Buzzetti (2001), Lorch (2010) and Pangle (1994). References to the *Memorabilia* are to book and chapter (e.g., 1.2) or to book, chapter and section (e.g., 1.2.2). Unidentified page references are to *Xenophon's Socrates* (Strauss 1972).

is a broad one, focusing on Socrates' benefactions to friends and not simply on his law-abidingness (1.6.11, 4.8.11). Thus, the *Memorabilia* must show some portion of Socrates' benefits to his friend and student, Xenophon. We may reasonably hope, then, that by reading the *Memorabilia* we too may be benefited—in other words, that we will not only be convinced of Socrates' justice but also learn something by understanding Xenophon's argument (29, 101, Strauss 1970, 85, 1.6.13, 4.1.1).

Strauss' opening assertion is very promising in this regard. He says that he expects to "transform into a certainty" his surmise, based on the title of the *Memorabilia* ("Recollections" or "Memoirs"), that Socrates was *the* model for Xenophon, or that Xenophon's time spent with Socrates was the most memorable part of his very memorable life (3, Strauss 1970, 85). We can reason, then, that if Socrates was a model for Xenophon, he must have been a prudent man who understood how to conduct his own affairs. Additionally, because Strauss treats the *Oeconomicus* first—whereas Xenophon presents the *Oeconomicus* as a continuation of the *Memorabilia*—he makes us aware that the prudent conduct of one's affairs must include the prudent management of one's household. Therefore, Strauss must have concluded that Socrates was a model household manager as far as Xenophon was concerned. But how could Strauss, or Xenophon, possibly arrive at such a conclusion? Socrates' bad end would seem to raise doubts about his ability to manage his own affairs at all prudently. Even if we could accept Xenophon's puzzling suggestion that Socrates preferred death in the given dire circumstances (4.8.1), how did he find himself in such circumstances? That Socrates considered himself superior to other philosophers is clear from Xenophon's differentiating Socrates from "the others," on the grounds that they sought wisdom in divine matters before they understood the human things. Yet, other philosophers did not suffer Socrates' fate. How could Socrates claim to have a superior knowledge of human things if he could not even protect himself from an ignominious death? To put it more generally, how can we believe that Socrates is any sort of model for a gentleman if he could not successfully navigate a peaceful existence among his fellow citizens in one of the most intellectually tolerant cities of his time?

While Strauss himself does not raise these doubts at the opening of *Xenophon's Socrates*, we must raise them for ourselves if we wish to understand the argument of his book, for Strauss' treatment of the *Memorabilia* is difficult to follow without some prior idea of what the important questions are for us and for Socrates. In particular, we must remain aware of the importance of understanding the management of human beings for this famous founder of political philosophy. This awareness is difficult to maintain because, even though Socrates insisted that it is vital to understand the political things, he

did not promise to be a teacher of them (1.2.3, 1.2.8). We hear more about the questions he raised than the answers he gave (Strauss 1972, 9, 1.1.16, 1.2.36, 4.4.9).

The *Memorabilia*, however, is very helpful in this regard, for Xenophon addresses the corruption charge in such a way as to make clear that Socrates' difficulty was tied to his widespread reputation as a teacher of that elusive capacity to manage human beings. Xenophon implicitly concedes that Socrates was a teacher, if only by example, by admitting that gifted young men sought to associate with Socrates because they saw in him an ability to deal with anybody as he wished—at least in speech—combined with what appeared to be an unsurpassed understanding of human or political affairs (1.2.12–16, 1.2.47–48, compare 1.6.1 to 1.6.15).

Socrates had his own name for the ability to manage human beings. He called it the kingly or “royal” art (or science or virtue), paradoxically combining or conflating under this name two seemingly different capacities: managing households and managing cities (3.4.12, 4.2.11, Strauss 1972, 63–64).² While Xenophon insists that Socrates never promised to teach the excellence that belongs to gentlemen, including the knowledge of “how to deal with one’s city and household” (1.2.2–3, cf. 1.1.16, 1.2.48, 1.2.64), the behavior of some of his former students, most famously Alcibiades and Critias, aroused public suspicion against Socrates. The *Memorabilia*, which highlights Socrates’ ability to be helpful in the public or political aspect of the royal art, defends Socrates against the charge that he was somehow responsible for the misdeeds of Critias and Alcibiades (1.2.12–47). Critias and Alcibiades themselves were not particularly interested in managing their households, for they had great public tasks in mind to perform. Other men, however, like Simmias and Cebes left their native city to learn from Socrates how to live a private life well (3.11.17). As Strauss points out, Xenophon highlights such private gentleman as “true associates” and dismisses Critias and Alcibiades as unreceptive to Socrates because they were not interested in his way of life and therefore left Socrates as soon as they felt that they had learned political skills (1.2.48, 2.9.1, Strauss 1972, 15).

Promises aside, Xenophon ultimately shows Socrates enticing potential students with his apparent knowledge of human affairs while, at the same time, undermining their confidence in their own comprehension of the matter (4.2.1, 4.2.20). He also shows Socrates having lengthy conversations with companions to improve their grasp of political practicalities (2.1, 3.1–6). Socrates’ reputation as a man who understood the political things was such that sophists considered him to be a rival (1.6, 4.4.6–12). Xenophon goes so far as to show

2 Strauss sometimes translates *basilikē* as “kingly,” but he uses the word “royal” when he wishes to be more precise (e.g., 96, cf. Strauss [1970] 87, Strauss [1975] 117).

Socrates fending off a challenge by one such rival who was trying to steal away his “constant companions” by saying, “Would I more engage in political affairs, if I engaged in them [myself] alone, or if I should attend to there being as many as possible competent to engage in them?” (1.6.15) Moreover, at the end of his list of the “what is” questions of the “human things” that Socrates was “always conversing about,” Xenophon says that Socrates considered this knowledge to be what distinguishes a gentleman from a slave, and he included on that list “what is a city?” and “what is a statesman?” (1.1.16)

Looked at from the point of view of Socrates as a potential teacher of the royal art, Strauss’ statement about the unusual character of Xenophon’s forensic rhetoric in the *Memorabilia* now appears misleading. Xenophon’s rhetoric exposes his subject’s greatest vulnerability at the beginning and end only if the corruption charge is less dangerous than the impiety charge. For the central bulk of the work, with its focus on Socrates as a benefactor of his companions through speeches, could appear as a long continued response to the corruption charge, to the question of whether Socrates made his companions better or worse by conversing with them (1.4.1). Indeed, Strauss indicates that the corruption charge was a driving force behind the impiety charge, for Socrates’ came into conflict with fathers who did not appreciate his influence upon their sons (1.2.49–53, Strauss 1972, 80). Those sons were attracted to Socrates because they hoped that they could better learn from him how to live their lives, presumably because they became dissatisfied with their fathers’ instruction as a result of Socrates’ speeches (4.2).

1 The Title

In *Xenophon’s Socratic Discourse*, Strauss renders the Greek title of the *Memorabilia* (*Apomnēmoneumata*) “provisionally” as “Memoirs” or “Reminiscences.” Yet in *Xenophon’s Socrates* he changes it to “Recollections” (Strauss 1970, 84, Strauss 1972, 3). He seems to have seen the need for a translation that could accommodate unpleasant as well as pleasant memories, since we recall events that we would not choose to reminisce about. One could understand the title in these terms: although Strauss argues elsewhere that Xenophon is inclined to make his writing gentler by emphasizing good things (Strauss 1975, 107), in the *Memorabilia* Xenophon could not overlook the fact that Socrates’ life ended in a way that most people would not choose, and so Xenophon had to consider with some frankness the circumstances attending his death. Strauss, however, takes a strange and extreme direction by suggesting that we try to understand the title by looking to the only use of the word in the

Memorabilia itself, where it means “resenting,” or “remembering one’s grudge” (1.2.31). Now, Strauss points out in both of his books on Xenophon’s Socrates that Xenophon’s one recollection in the *Memorabilia* of a conversation of his own with Socrates reveals his mentor calling him a “fool” and a “wretch” for being willing to risk kissing someone beautiful (20–21, Strauss 1970, 90). Far worse is Socrates’ treatment of Critias in the passage where Strauss finds the only use of the word *apomnēmoneumata* (3). Whereas Socrates jokingly reprimands Xenophon in front of a mutual friend, he is very rude to Critias in front of a large crowd which included Critias’ beloved, a youth with whom Socrates had lengthy private conversations of his own, as we learn later (4.2–3, 5–7). Socrates’ interaction with Critias certainly resulted in public humiliation and it potentially aroused jealousy. Xenophon claims that Critias hated Socrates as a result of the incident described, and passed a law in writing against Socrates when he came to power, “recollecting it against him (*apomnēmoneuein*).” Now, Strauss of course does not relate this ugly incident with Critias in his opening paragraph. He merely offers the one citation (1.2.31). Nevertheless, given the parallels between the Xenophon and Critias stories, the reader may wonder if Strauss means to begin his work by jocularly hinting that the *Memorabilia* is Xenophon’s revenge in writing against Socrates. But it is of course absurd to suggest that Xenophon resented Socrates in any way. The *Memorabilia* is the highest praise of Socrates that one could imagine, and Xenophon clearly loved and respected his teacher. Strauss knows it is absurd, says it is absurd, and yet wants us to think about it anyway. He may want us to ponder the difference between Critias and Xenophon, to consider whether Socrates could benefit every one of his companions to the same degree, or whether Socrates did not provide his unjust enemies with a motive for attacking him. They at least had ammunition against which Socrates’ own defenses were not quite adequate.

2 The Outline

Strauss makes it perfectly clear that he considers an outline of the argument as essential to understanding the work. Unfortunately, he makes his own outline very difficult to follow. One’s initial reaction is necessarily bewilderment and doubt as to whether all of the listing, counting, categorizing, and puzzling will ultimately yield any real payoff. Since one can in fact learn a great deal from *Xenophon’s Socrates* simply by perusing Strauss’ summaries and enjoying his many wonderful and eye-opening observations regarding Xenophon’s charming vignettes, a reader may be forgiven for leaving it at that, and skipping over the perplexities of his argument. Yet, as we saw above, Strauss himself

promises more. If we wish to arrive at his certainty that Socrates was a model for Xenophon, then we cannot avoid trying to understand his outline of the *Memorabilia*.

The outline is as follows. Strauss begins by identifying two main sections of very unequal length: "The Refutation of the Indictment" (1.1–2, two chapters), and "Socrates as Benefactor of his Companions" (1.3–4.8, thirty-seven chapters). He then subdivides the latter section into the following subjects: "The Man Himself" (1.3–2.1, six chapters), "Relatives" (2.2–2.3, two chapters), "Friends" (2.4–2.10, seven chapters), "Men Longing for the Noble Things" (3.1–3.7, seven chapters), "Descent" (3.8–3.14, seven chapters), and "Book IV" (4.1–4.8, eight chapters).

One reason the outline is difficult to follow is because Strauss begins it on the basis of two different trains of thought. After his division of the work into two main parts (the brief refutation of the indictment, and the bulk of the work on Socrates' benefactions), Strauss starts to explain the remainder of his sections by referring to "the objects of man's duties," which he finds treated in those sections, and which he supports with citations to several lists of duties found in the *Memorabilia* (18). The duties he identifies are partially reflected in the headings noted above. At the same time, however, he also traces an alternation of topics in the individual chapters between the two themes of piety and continence, along the lines of Xenophon's response to the indictment (18). Unfortunately, after an initial strong presence in the "The Man Himself" section of Strauss' outline, this "plan of the indictment" train of thought mostly drops from sight.³ From that point on, it looks as though we will continue to follow the "objects of man's duties" train of thought with the topics "relatives," "friends," and "men longing for political honor." Yet, his section on politics is in fact entitled "Men Longing for the Noble Things." The breadth of this title goes beyond the duty theme. Next, Strauss offers the unhelpful title, "Descent," which obviously no longer fits the duty theme. Discussion of duties as an organizing principle is then almost completely dropped by the time Strauss reaches his last, even more opaque, subject heading, "Book IV" (cf. 94). So, Strauss follows neither of his two initial trains of thought to the end of his interpretation.

We will understand more of Strauss' outline if we take a moment to review, with a brief narrative summary, Xenophon's primary editorial markers (1.1.1, 1.3.1, 3.1.1, 4.1.1) and his indications of shifts in the argument (1.2.1, 1.4.1, 2.7.1). Xenophon begins the *Memorabilia* by wondering what accusatory speeches

3 Strauss summarizes the alternation between piety and continence just before his section entitled "Relatives" (39). From that point, Strauss concentrates on the "objects of man's duties" divisions. But, at the end of his treatment of 1.3–3.14, Strauss reminds us of the earlier alternation between piety and continence (91).

persuaded the Athenians to condemn Socrates. He then describes the indictment (1.1.1). After addressing impiety, he begins the next chapter wondering how some were persuaded that Socrates corrupted the young, in light of Socrates' great continence regarding physical appetites, his endurance, and his self education to moderate needs (1.2.1). This chapter is dominated by the problem caused by Alcibiades and Critias, although it also addresses whether Socrates undermined the standing of fathers, "other relatives," friends, and the democratic regime (1.2.9–55). The first two chapters thus show the basis for Strauss' identification of Xenophon's alternation between chapters addressing piety and continence.

Xenophon next recalls how Socrates benefited his companions, partly by showing Socrates' deeds, thereby revealing the sort of person he was, and partly by recounting his conversations (1.3.1). With this chapter, Strauss begins the main division, "Socrates as Benefactor of his Companions," and also his "The Man Himself" section of that division (17–18). Xenophon here addresses in the same chapter Socrates' piety and then continence, occasioning Strauss' first remark on Xenophon's choice to mimic the order of the indictment (21). The next chapter illustrates Strauss' point nicely by showing Socrates address the deficient piety of an avowed atheist (1.4).⁴

While, in Strauss' first section, "The Man Himself," Xenophon explicitly names the subject matter of most of Socrates' individual speeches—the things of Aphrodite (1.3.14), the divine (*to daimonion*) (1.4.1, 1.4.19), continence (1.5.1, 1.5.6), boasting (1.7.1), training oneself to continence (2.1.1)—he skips characterizing the subject matter of the conversations he presents with Socrates' rival, the sophist Antiphon (1.6). He does note, however, that the conversations with Antiphon treat Socrates' wisdom and happiness (29). We see that Strauss' title of this section, "The Man Himself," is ambiguous. It calls attention to the duty every man has to himself (i.e., to attend to his moral and physical condition) but it also calls attention to Socrates himself, who served as an outstanding example to his companions.⁵

4 Xenophon opens this chapter by mentioning the opinion based on "what some people write and say about him," that Socrates was best at "turning" human beings toward virtue but unable to lead them to it (1.4.1). We might be tempted to look upon this opening as a shift in Xenophon's argument. Strauss, however, does not present it that way. After reinforcing his statement about the alternation between piety and continence, he explains the placement of these opening remarks in terms of the difference between piety and continence: piety or belief is more susceptible to persuasive speeches than continence, which is a matter of practice (21–22).

5 If the focus in this section is on Socrates as an example one might still fit the section title under Strauss' rubric of duties: assuming Socrates himself supplies the example of how one

Xenophon also does not announce the subject matter of the next two chapters (2.2–2.3), but Strauss identifies it as a section on “Relatives.” We thus see that Strauss identifies the first two sections of this main division of the work on Socrates’ benefactions—“The Man Himself” and “Relatives”—under his own initiative, with little discernable help from what he calls Xenophon’s “editorial remarks” (39). Strauss’ section on relatives is unique in this division of the work because of its extreme brevity. One could very well see it as part of his prior section, if one understood Socrates as “The Man Himself,” for each of these chapters shows Socrates advising a person he knows—his son Lamprocles (2.2) and his companion Chairecrates (2.3, 1.2.48)—how to deal with a single difficult relative, each of whom Socrates knows perhaps even better: Lamprocles’ mother (Socrates’ wife, Xanthippe) and Chairecrates’ brother (Socrates’ well-known student, Chairephon).⁶ The only other section comprised of two chapters in Strauss’ outline is the “Refutation of the Indictment,” which precedes “The Man Himself” section. Coincidentally, both of the conversations in the “Relatives” section present us with a special connection to Socrates’ trial. The Lamprocles chapter directly addresses the question of filial piety, even though this is the place in his outline where Strauss begins to drop his discussion of the alternation between the themes piety and continence (2.2.13–14, Strauss 1972, 39–41).⁷ The relative under discussion in the next chapter, Chairephon, was the companion who famously questioned the Delphic oracle about Socrates’ superiority, Socrates’ recounting of which caused such a sensation at his trial.⁸

should attend to oneself, his grateful students would feel an obligation to “The Man Himself” for supplying that example.

- 6 On Xanthippe, see *Sym.* 2.10, Plato *Phaedo* 60a, 116b. On Chairephon, see, e.g., *Clouds* 502.
- 7 Strauss’ final summary of that alternation just before his commentary on this chapter is surely meant to remind us of the train of thought (39). The connection between filial piety and piety generally was probably more obvious for the ancients than for us. Aristophanes makes a point of bringing out this connection in his treatment of Socrates in the *Clouds*. The mother does not appear in that play either, but Aristophanes also shows that she has a stake in the outcome of the drama (lines 43, 1444–50, cf. Strauss [1970] 112).
- 8 This incident is reported in both Plato’s *Apology of Socrates* (20e–21a) and Xenophon’s *Apology of Socrates to the Jury* (14). Since both of these chapters make Strauss wonder why Xenophon does not show us Socrates’ conversations with the difficult relatives mentioned, we ourselves can wonder whether an accuser would even go so far as to suggest that Socrates bears some responsibility for Chairephon’s difficult behavior toward his brother, for example (1.2.49–52, cf. 1.2.46, *Sym.* 2.8–10, *Mem.* 1.7). If Socrates was such a fine example as a gentleman then how is it that Chairephon did not learn from him how to avoid mistreating his brother? This section suggests that Socrates was not very well equipped to address the accuser who said that Socrates caused his associates to look down on relatives (1.2.51–55).

Strauss begins his “Friends” section (2.4–10) by following Xenophon’s explicit topic descriptions: friends (2.4.1), reviewing how much one is worth to friends (2.5.1), and instruction in testing types of friends worth acquiring (2.6.1). Starting with 2.7, Xenophon announces a shift—a change noted by Strauss—from Socratic exhortation or instruction (about friendship) to Socrates’ helping his friends with his own better understanding or advice (2.7.1, Strauss 1972, 51, cf. Strauss 1970, 101). When Strauss later states that the section beginning in Book Three, “Men Longing for the Noble Things,” is the “only one whose subject matter is explicitly stated by Xenophon,” he calls our attention to his awareness that Xenophon did *not* explicitly divide “The Man Himself” section from either the “Relatives” section or the “Friends” section (3.1.1, Strauss 1972, 55). At least with his section on friends we can see that Strauss has evidence based on Xenophon’s explicit announcement of the subject of the individual conversations (cf. 39).⁹

9 Related to the topic of friends, we note that there is a feature of the *Memorabilia* that Strauss conceals by his complex approach to outlining the argument. The central chapter of the *Memorabilia* portrays a conversation with a young man elected as cavalry commander (3.3). Strauss quietly informs us in his commentary at this point that Xenophon vouches for the authenticity of this conversation and that Xenophon wrote a treatise on cavalry command (59). The conversation itself soon indicates that the cavalry commander must know the art of horsemanship, for the cavalry commander cannot entrust the fitness of the cavalry’s horses, on which so much depends, to the sole supervision of the individual cavalymen (60, 3.3.3–4). Strauss refrains from informing us that Xenophon also wrote a treatise on horsemanship. (*On Horsemanship* may be the work in the *corpus Xenophonteum* of which Strauss takes the least notice in his writings. Except for an odd note on its title in Strauss [2000] 107, n. 2, I am not aware of his citing the work again after his 1939 article on Xenophon—Strauss [1939], 509 fn. 5, 510 fn. 1—cf. Strauss’ comment on the bridle maker’s shop, Strauss [1972] 95, and Strauss [1975] 117). We will describe below the ascent Strauss traces in Book III to a missing Socratic conversation with Plato. Yet we might entertain the possibility of a different “ascent” and “descent” in the *Memorabilia* with a potential peak that points to Xenophon rather than to Plato. Xenophon may not be as self-deprecating as his report of his one conversation in the *Memorabilia* makes him appear. Strauss does not mention this possibility and even accidentally throws us off its track by miscounting the total number of chapters at 49 instead of 39 (8). He opens his commentary by insisting, “we are all beginners” (3). If Strauss himself ever entertained this possibility of Xenophon’s centrality in the *Memorabilia* (58, consider also his Preface), he may have thought that his complicated approach to the outline offers the most promising path to appreciating the meaning of so simple a hidden structure, i.e., that we must struggle first with the complex surface to appreciate Xenophon and his art. The scholars to whom Strauss refers in his Appendix certainly might react to the thought of Xenophon being comparable to Plato as a ridiculous boasting that could only confirm Socrates’ epithets for Xenophon, “fool” and “wretch” (cf. Strauss [1939] 536).

Xenophon does not identify the topics of the chapters on “Men Longing for the Noble Things,” (3.1–7) but lets the conversations themselves reveal that the “noble” for which these men long is “political honor,” at least in the first six chapters, for the seventh is ambiguous: Charmides does not seem to want political honor, even though Socrates directs him to a political life (3.7). Charmides’ longing for something noble other than political honor helps to make a transition to the remaining seven chapters of Book Three, chapters Strauss characterizes under the heading “Descent” but which include some remarkable conversations with people who aspire to various noble or beautiful objects (including wisdom), as well as a unique conversation with a beautiful woman named Theodote (3.8–3.11).¹⁰ In keeping with the impression of descent, Book Three ends with nondescript conversations with several people who do not seem to be worth naming (3.13–14).

In the first chapter of Strauss’ last section, “Book IV,” Xenophon asserts that Socrates was so beneficial in every matter and in every manner that there was nothing more beneficial than being a companion of Socrates and spending time with him anywhere at all and in any matter whatsoever (4.1.1). Xenophon reports that a part of what Socrates considered a good nature was a desire for knowledge of household management and political management of human beings and human affairs (4.1.2). In the subsequent chapters, he shows Socrates’ approach to a beautiful youth, Euthydemus, who did not have the best nature but did have a desire for this sort of knowledge. Socrates’ association with Euthydemus begins with an appeal to his political ambition or to his desire for the knowledge just mentioned, followed by a cross-examination that brings Euthydemus to the point of perplexity and discouragement. Xenophon identifies the topics of Socrates’ conversations thereafter as: moderation (in the first place about the gods) before skill in speaking, acting, and contriving (4.3.1), justice (4.4.1–5), skill in taking action, and therefore continence (4.5.1), skill in conversing, and thus knowing what each of the beings is (4.6.1), for example, what piety is (4.6.2).

Strauss provocatively asserts that Xenophon presents here the core of Socrates’ teaching according to its intrinsic order, from its beginning to its end (with a view to one type of student) (94–5). Strauss thus contradicts the general impression Xenophon leaves earlier in the *Memorabilia* that Socrates did not have a teaching, *per se*. Perhaps this boldness explains why Strauss opaquely entitles the last section of his outline “Book IV.” In any event, Strauss empha-

10 Some of the conversations in the series of chapters 3.8–11 vaguely remind us of Socrates’ series of inquiries leading up to his conversation with the perfect gentleman in the *Oeconomicus* (6.13–17).

sizes what Xenophon eventually makes clear: Socrates did not merely raise questions about the human things and act as a fine example, but he taught his students what a gentleman should know, when he knew it, and led them to others who understood what he did not know (4.7.1, cf. Strauss 1972, 22). This is not to say that he taught everyone his full understanding of the human things, for in this subject, as in others like geometry and astronomy, Socrates taught only what was fitting for the individual to know, even though his own inquiry went beyond that limit (4.7.2).

The last chapter of Book Four returns to the *daimonion* but now focuses on the question of whether Socrates was lying about it, since he was condemned to death even though he claimed that it told him what to do in advance (4.8.1). After addressing this question by showing that what the *daimonion*'s advice led to, death, was good in the circumstances, Xenophon closes with his eulogy of Socrates (4.8.11).

We can see even from this short summary that Strauss correctly notes that Xenophon is uneven in his editorial remarks on subject matter (92). As indicated above, Strauss' first overview of his outline suggests that he arrived at four of his subject headings by noticing in several lists throughout the *Memorabilia* the themes treated in those sections, namely, "what we may call the objects of man's duties: the man himself, relatives, friends, and the men longing for political honor" (17–18). On the face of it, attending to one's own moral and physical condition, to one's relatives, and to one's friends all seem to belong on a list of a man's duties. "Men longing for political honor" does not as obviously belong, and even less so after Strauss follows Xenophon more closely and modifies it to "men longing for the noble things." As we mentioned above, the sections he entitles "Descent," and "Book iv" are clearly not arrived at from these lists. While the subjects "friends," and "men longing for the noble things" largely follow Xenophon's editorial remarks, identifying the first two subjects as "the man himself" and "relatives" requires Strauss' help. Strauss does not claim that the consideration of "duties" is sufficient for understanding the whole plan of the *Memorabilia* but only that it helps us to discern it "to some extent" (17). He points out that at least one of the topics from the six lists he cites on man's duties is missing, for "servants" (i.e. "slaves") are not covered in the *Memorabilia* but are treated at length in the *Oeconomicus* (18). By this comment, Strauss shows us that he is quite aware of the theme household management and its parts. Although Strauss of course speaks at length on this theme in his treatment of the *Oeconomicus*, he wishes to allude to it without amplifying it in his treatment of the *Memorabilia*.

Strauss' mention of servants as a theme not discussed in the *Memorabilia* prompts us to mull over his six citations offering the lists of "objects of man's

duties" (18). The first list is from one of Xenophon's own remarks. It reminds us of Socrates as a potential teacher of the royal art, for it tells us what the gentlemen wanted who associated with Socrates: the ability to deal beautifully or honorably (*kalōs*) with their household, servants, relatives, friends, city, and citizens (1.2.48). The fact that household (*oikos*), servants (*oiketai*), and relatives (*oikeoi*) all have *oikia* (home or family) as their root calls our attention to the fact that servants and relatives are distinguishable from the household simply and thus are part of one's household management (*oikonomia*) but not the whole of it. Since, at a minimum, the household must include "the man himself," we wonder again why Strauss' fairly brief section on "the man himself" could not be combined with his extremely brief section on "relatives" to form one section on the "household" of comparable length with the other sections within the "benefactions" part of his outline. One reason is that a part of the household far more important than the servants is missing from the *Memorabilia*. For a man's household need not have servants or even children, but it must include his wife. By treating the *Oeconomicus* before the *Memorabilia*, Strauss makes us keenly aware of Socrates' opinion regarding the crucial importance of the education of one's wife in a well-run household, and of the lengths to which Xenophon goes to make us aware of its importance to Socrates (*Oec.* 3.3, 3.7–11). Strauss even goes so far as to entitle four of his chapters in his *Oeconomicus* interpretation: "*Gunaikologia*—I,—II,—III, and—IV." His mention of the missing treatment of servants in the *Memorabilia* in the same breath as the fact that the *Oeconomicus* treats servants at length is intended, I suggest, to make us notice on our own that Xenophon avoids any explicit mention of wives in his lists of obligations in the *Memorabilia*. Xenophon practices this avoidance at the same time as he acknowledges in the *Memorabilia* the importance of marriage in men's lives—as Strauss also observes (1.1.8, 2.2.4–5, cf. Strauss 1972, 5, 83).¹¹ Strauss helps to bring this problem out by joking about the reason that

11 Marriage is a special form of friendship and of course a gentleman has obligations to his friends. The private character of this type of friendship, however, makes wives less susceptible to discussion than other friends (2.7.36, *Oec.* 3.12, cf. *Sym.* 9.7, *Hiero* 3.3). We should be clear that Strauss' use of the missing category of "servants" in order to bring out Xenophon's lacuna is not meant to imply that wives are comparable to servants, other than as being a distinct part of the household. To the contrary, wives are necessarily free citizens. Many men neglect their friends in general and treat them as less important than servants, yet Socrates is at pains to correct this mistake in his companions (2.4.1, 2.5.1). Moreover, wives are friends who are also members of one's own household, and so one has an additional obligation to attend to their education, for every household member—starting with the head of the household—must be educated to understand their role within the household.

a potential conversation with Xanthippe is missing, then momentarily dropping the subject and bringing it back up to say that Xenophon could not speak with propriety of the reason for that conversation being missing (41–42).¹²

The other five lists Strauss cites to support his “objects of duties” framework are Xenophon’s report of Socrates’ advice to various interlocutors, rather than Xenophon speaking in his own voice. The second list mentions acquiring good friends, subduing enemies, and becoming powerful in body and soul so as to manage honorably one’s own household, treat one’s friends well, and do good deeds for the fatherland (2.1.19). The third list includes obtaining for oneself one’s desires, benefiting friends, raising up one’s paternal household, enlarging one’s fatherland, being famous, first in the city, then in Greece, and maybe, like Themistocles, even among the barbarians (3.6.2). The fourth list emphasizes gaining self-knowledge before considering the affairs of others, while not neglecting political affairs, since, when the city’s affairs go well, it also benefits other citizens, one’s own friends, and oneself, not the least (3.7.9). The fifth list discusses the goods that come from obeying the laws, including avoiding penalty and gaining honor from the city, winning in law courts, being entrusted with other men’s wealth, sons and daughters, being trusted by the whole city, having parents, relatives, servants, friends, citizens, and strangers who will obtain just things from one, being trusted even by enemies, being wanted as an ally, and being entrusted by allies, having good deeds done to one because others will expect gratitude in return, having friends rather than enemies, and having enemies who are less likely to wage war (4.4.17). The last list recommends self-control as a means for learning or attending to anything noble (*kalos*) and good, through which one will beautifully (*kalōs*) govern his own body and manage his own household, and become beneficial to friends and city and overpower enemies (4.5.10).

This overview allows us to see that not only is “household” missing from Strauss’ subject headings but so is the duty to “city and citizens.” While the section, “Men Longing for the Noble Things” might be considered as treating that

12 We cannot presume that the basis of the joke and the basis of the impropriety are the same. The Xanthippe lacuna and Strauss’ treatment of it in the *Memorabilia* may partially illuminate an odd remark that Strauss makes in his commentary on Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*. Strauss claims there that Xenophon recounts the conversation between Ischomachus and his wife in such a way that at times Socrates seems somehow involved in it (Strauss [1970] 136). Strauss thus just barely imagines a non-existent conversation between Socrates and at least one gentleman’s wife, which is precisely the category of Socratic conversation that occurs neither in Plato’s nor even in Xenophon’s writings (compare *Education of Cyrus* 3.1.37–40, 3.3.2–3).

topic, improving the self-understanding of men who long for something noble is not the same thing as improving the city's prospects for excellent leadership, even if the two goals accidentally coincide on occasion.¹³ Strauss suggests this by explaining that the series of conversations that he describes as a "Descent" (3.8–14) was preceded by an implied "ascent" in the conversations of the section he entitled "Men Longing for the Noble Things" (3.1–7). That ascent leads to what Strauss conjectures is a deliberately missing conversation with Plato, presumably Socrates' best student (73–74). The two ascending conversations preceding the conjectured one with Plato are with Plato's relatives: Glaucon, and then Charmides. Socrates dissuades Plato's brother Glaucon from a career in politics, for which he is not suited, but persuades Plato's uncle Charmides to undertake such a career, for which he is suited but for which he has a natural aversion. Strauss points out that the oligarchic career of Charmides had bad consequences for democratic Athens (73). By explaining this sequence regarding Plato's relatives, Strauss may mean to suggest that Socrates improved Plato's self-understanding as well and thereby *dissuaded* him from a career in Athenian politics for which he happened to be naturally very well suited. If that were the case, then Socrates' would have done Athens a (further) disservice, even while he did Plato and the world a very great service, for Socrates held that the good natures, if properly educated, would not only be happy themselves and beautifully manage their own households but would also be able to make other human beings as well as cities happy (4.1.2). In any case, we can imagine why Strauss gradually drops his rubric of the "objects of man's duties" as he approaches the subject of the fourth book: Socratic education. It would be difficult to fit "educating the children of one's fellow citizens in the Socratic manner" under the heading "duties."¹⁴

Still, the duty from these lists that is most obviously missing from Strauss' headings is the duty to one's household. It is mentioned four times in the six lists cited, but Strauss only subtly calls our attention to its being missing by including a brief section on relatives. Now, this lacuna on the household is especially surprising given the frequency with which Xenophon mentions Socrates' and his companions' interest in household management in the *Memorabilia*. It is also surprising given the lengths to which both Xenophon and Strauss go to illustrate that Socrates was in fact quite knowledgeable in household matters. Even setting aside Socrates' comprehensive inquiry in the *Oeconomicus*, the fact that respectable private gentlemen from all over Greece

13 Bruell 1994, xix.

14 Strauss does note that "the man himself" is treated in Book Four, although "friends," "relatives," and "men longing for the noble" are absent (94).

wanted to imitate Socrates in the sphere of household management suggests that he knew something about this subject (1.2.48, 3.11.17). Socrates certainly gives sound advice to his own son to avoid treating his mother ungratefully (2.2). Moreover, his reasoning with an Athenian gentleman facing financial ruin due to an excessive number of household dependents is highly effective, albeit unconventional (2.7). Most surprisingly, he even improves the thinking of an artful woman who was the head of a manifestly prosperous household, and thus wholly unaware that she needed his advice (3.11).¹⁵ Strauss generously explains Socrates' considerable knowledge in each of the three conversations mentioned above (39–42, 51–53, 85–89) yet he does not press too far the question of Socrates' own household in his treatment of the *Memorabilia*. This corresponds with Xenophon's greater clarity in this work about Socrates' abilities as a teacher of the political side of the royal art than about his abilities in the domestic realm, even while he has Socrates claim that they are the same art (3.4.12).

Let us close by mentioning a final important lacuna in Strauss' headings based on duties, which also recalls our opening doubts about Socrates as a model of prudence. Strauss draws our attention to the fact that a man has a duty to subdue or overpower enemies, or to do "good deeds for the fatherland." Xenophon's own list of an adult gentleman's duties in his treatise *On Horsemanship* is the following: household, friends, affairs of politics, and affairs of war (2.2). Strauss emphasizes Xenophon's omission of a man's duty in war by pointing out that courage or manliness is not included among Socrates' virtues in Xenophon's portrait of Socrates (31, 50, 78, 126). Yet, Socrates demonstrates an understanding of generalship through his conversations with men who long for that office (3.1, 3.2, 3.4). A man also has a duty to protect

15 Socrates had studied matchmaking, among other topics, with Aspasia (2.6.36, *Oec.* 3.14, Plato *Menexenus* 235e–6d, 249d–e; cf. *Theaetetus* 149a, Strauss [1972] 50, 86, Strauss [1978] 57). To decide whether Socrates truly was competent in household management, as he is presented in the *Memorabilia*, one would have to examine the seemingly contrary evidence from Xenophon's *Symposium* that Xanthippe did not impress his companions as a well-behaved wife, in spite of Socrates' frequent exhortation and occasional borderline boasting regarding his understanding of the education of wives (*Oec.* 3.15, *Sym.* 2.8–10, cf. *Mem.* 1.7). Socrates' discussion of Xanthippe in his *Symposium* may be Xenophon's way of parodying—in a context which also parodies Book Five of the *Republic*—the fact that Plato has Socrates give his speech in his *Symposium* in the guise of the woman Diotima. If so, Xenophon encourages us to consider whether there are underlying connections between those two separate Platonic dialogues. In other words, is Socrates' proposed equal education of women and its political context related to his imitation of, or learning from, women?

himself (or his household) from personal enemies (*Oec.* 1.6). As we said at the outset, given his ignominious end, Socrates appears a failure at this. Whether or not he neglected his own advice regarding attending to one's own strength or condition (cf. 3.12, *Sym.* 2.19), he seems to have weakened his position by making unnecessary personal enemies in Athens, partly by saying subversive things about the reigning regimes (1.2.32–37, 1.2.58), and certainly by insulting particular individuals (1.2.31) and by undermining fathers (1.2.49–51, cf. *Sym.* 9.1). Strauss suggests that Socrates fell short of manliness because he did not surpass his enemies in harming them (126, cf. 140, *Apol.* 29–31, Strauss 1970, 87–9).¹⁶ His interpretation of the *Memorabilia* ends with this apparently inexplicable failure on Socrates' part, as he takes up Socrates' related deliberation about his defense speech in Xenophon's *Apology of Socrates to the Jury*. We cannot be sure that Strauss will resolve there the problem of Socrates' failure in self-defense, but his treatment of the *Memorabilia* at least offers some indication of the scope of his difficulties.

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16 Strauss connects this apparent lack of manliness with Socrates' swearing by Hera (27, 89). His future accuser Lycon, in Xenophon's *Symposium*, swears by Hera as he calls Socrates a noble and good "human being" (*anthrōpos*) as opposed to a "man" (*anēr*) (9.1). Strauss remarks, "He thus expresses the same thought which Xenophon expresses by failing to count manliness among Socrates virtues" (177).

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CHAPTER 13

Strauss on Xenophon's Anabasis



The Difference between Socrates and Xenophon in Leo Strauss' Account of Xenophon's *Anabasis*

Devin Stauffer

I offer in this chapter some observations and reflections on one of the central themes of Leo Strauss' interpretation of Xenophon's *Anabasis*: the difference between Socrates and Xenophon.¹

Both Xenophon and Strauss himself point to Socrates as the model of the philosopher, the man who lived the philosophic life in its purest form. It is no surprise that Strauss' greatest works on Xenophon are his extremely focused and detailed interpretations of Xenophon's Socratic writings. *Xenophon's Socrates* and *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse*, especially when taken together, bring out the centrality and supreme importance of the account of Socrates in Xenophon's diverse *corpus*. But Strauss also wrote an essay on the *Anabasis*, just as Xenophon wrote the *Anabasis* itself. And the *Anabasis*, as Strauss stresses at the beginning of his essay, is the work in which Xenophon puts himself forward. The *Anabasis* is Xenophon's "ascent," not only in the sense that he travels with Cyrus on an expedition into the interior of Asia and eventually becomes the hero of the work, but also in the sense that Xenophon's own life is most on display and under consideration in this work (see 105). But, especially given the prominence that both Strauss and Xenophon give to Socrates and the Socratic life, one of the questions at the heart of Strauss' essay and Xenophon's *Anabasis* is how one should understand Xenophon as an alternative to Socrates. What is the difference between Socrates and Xenophon, or between the philosophic life in the purest and strictest form and Xenophon's apparent deviation from it?

The importance of this issue in Strauss' essay can be seen by the way Strauss introduces it. After discussing some subtle remarks Xenophon makes about the death by torture of the nastiest character in the *Anabasis*, Meno, Strauss mentions that Xenophon himself takes center stage in the wake of Meno's demise. But Strauss then indicates that the Meno-Xenophon contrast—the contrast between the "arch-villain and the hero"—is less important than it first appears, and he raises the question of who is truly the foil of Xenophon in the

1 All parenthetical references in the text are to Strauss 1983.

Anabasis (109). The leading candidate for this title appears for a while in the essay to be Proxenus, and Strauss discusses the divide between Xenophon and Proxenus, the heart of which is that Xenophon was “tougher, wilier, and wittier” than Proxenus. Strauss then says vaguely—and by way of retreating from a suggestion that would blame Proxenus’ softness on Gorgias, his teacher—that the difference between Proxenus and Xenophon “is likely to be connected to Xenophon’s having been familiar with Socrates” (111). And he asks, “Must we then understand Xenophon—the Xenophon presented in the *Anabasis*—in the light of Socrates?” (111)

But Strauss’ interest, or at least his emphasis, proves to be focused not so much on the *influence* of Socrates on Xenophon as on the *difference* between the two men (see 112 in particular). Broadly speaking, Strauss’ approach in his interpretation of the *Anabasis* is to indicate the influence of Socrates on Xenophon while highlighting their difference.² In fact, in Strauss’ analysis, Socrates ultimately replaces Proxenus as the true foil of Xenophon in the *Anabasis*. As Strauss puts it: “We hardly go too far by saying that the principle which individualizes Xenophon in the *Anabasis* comes to sight by the contrast between him and Socrates, and not by that between him and Proxenos, to say no further word of Menon” (113). But what precisely is the difference between Socrates and Xenophon?

In the paragraph in which Strauss first poses and addresses this question, the most immediate difference seems to be that Xenophon was a man of action. Strauss remarks, “[Xenophon] did the political things in the common sense of the term, whereas Socrates did not” (112). Strauss then explains this difference by recalling, from his earlier discussion of Proxenus, what seem to be the chief ends of political action: a great name, great power, and much wealth (see 111; cf. *Anabasis* 2.6.16–17). Perhaps surprisingly, Strauss focuses initially on what would seem to be the lowest of these ends: wealth. He points to the obvious difference that whereas Socrates was very poor—and did not seem to mind it

2 Strauss suggests that he is following Xenophon in this respect (consider 112–13). Strauss’ approach is captured in the following formulation on page 112, in the context of discussing the partial manner in which Xenophon followed Socrates’ advice to consult the Delphic Oracle about his prospective journey: “The agreements as well as the disagreements between Xenophon and Socrates regarding the oracle make it all the more necessary for us to return to the question as to whether the Xenophon presented in the *Anabasis* must be understood in the light of Socrates, *in other words, as to what precisely is the difference between the two men*” (emphasis added). For examples of passages in which Strauss indicates but does not emphasize Socrates’ influence on Xenophon, consider what he says about the economic art and Xenophon’s “knowledge of things military, which he surely had not acquired during the present campaign” on page 115 (cf. 112), and his comments on Xenophon’s piety on page 122.

that way—Xenophon returned from his great adventure “in very comfortable circumstances” (112). But more important than this simple difference in their circumstances seems to be the fact that it reflects Xenophon’s desire for wealth and indicates a certain similarity between Xenophon and the perfect gentleman Ischomachus, who tried (unsuccessfully) to teach Socrates the economic art in Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*. Xenophon seems to have been, in some sense, an Ischomachean “economist,” that is, a money-maker. But Strauss also indicates, both in this early paragraph and elsewhere, that Xenophon was a student of Socrates, and, unlike the foolish Critoboulus, whom Strauss also mentions, Xenophon was a *successful* student of Socrates. Strauss thus leads us to this suggestion: Xenophon was somehow a combination of an Ischomachean economist and a Socratic, or, stated differently, he was a Socratic who did not want to lead, in every way, the life of Socrates but chose a life that was, in some ways, closer to that of the perfect gentleman.³ But this suggestion still does not quite tell us *why* Xenophon did not want to live as Socrates did, and thus it does not bring out the full character of the divide between the two men. Accordingly, Strauss goes on to acknowledge that the paragraph I have just considered is merely provisional.

Strauss’ further—and by his own suggestion “better” (119)—treatment of the difference between Xenophon and Socrates comes about six pages later, when he is discussing Xenophon’s march through Armenia. Using the opportunity to turn from the *Anabasis* to the *Education of Cyrus*, Strauss reports a story of a certain “sophist” who corrupted the son of the king of Armenia and “suffered the fate of Socrates” (119; see the *Education of Cyrus* 3.1.14 and 38–9). Suggesting that Armenia is a barbarian analogue of Athens, Strauss then speaks of some of the characteristics of the Armenian sophist, whom we are urged to see as a stand-in for Socrates. What Strauss has to say about this barbarian-Socrates, and thus by implication about Socrates himself, is quite striking. Strauss says that he was perfectly free of the desire for revenge, and that he rejected the notion of the gentleman’s virtue of surpassing one’s friends

3 A crucial passage in this connection is *Anabasis* 3.1.4–19, where Xenophon describes his decision to go with Proxenus to join Cyrus in apparent opposition to Socrates’ advice. The initial impression conveyed by this scene, however, is somewhat misleading. Although the scene seems to show a disagreement between Socrates and Xenophon, Socrates does not strongly object to Xenophon’s plan. And Socrates’ reluctance to approve of Xenophon’s plan may have been due in large part to a concern for his own deteriorating reputation in Athens. Nevertheless, Xenophon’s willingness to leave behind Socrates to follow Proxenus in joining Cyrus does indicate *some* difference in their concerns. Consider also *Anabasis* 5.3.4–13, where Xenophon describes how he spent some of the wealth that he gained on his journey.

in benefiting them and surpassing one's enemies in harming them. In elaborating the latter point, Strauss speaks of "the questionable character of this notion of virtue," which he says is "pointed out" by Xenophon's two lists of Socrates' virtues in which "courage (or manliness) does not occur and in which justice is identified with never harming anyone in the slightest" (119–20; see Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.8.11, *Apology of Socrates* 15–18).

Now, it is not clear what this has to do with Xenophon, and, curiously, after beginning a paragraph by promising to help us "understand somewhat better the difference between Xenophon and Socrates" (119), Strauss seems to say nothing about that difference. But he does begin the next paragraph by speaking of "the ascent of Xenophon or rather his native ascendancy," something which shows itself in the fact that he occupies a middle ground between the Spartan Cheirosophos, who foolishly beat a certain Armenian village chief without binding him, and Proxenus, who "would never have beaten the village chief" (120; see *Anabasis* 4.6.3). According to Strauss, "Xenophon would have beaten him if necessary but have taken the precaution of binding him." "Xenophon," Strauss says, "keeps to the right mean" (120).

Although Strauss does not say so in so many words, this remark, coming where it does, is clearly meant to be compared with what he has just suggested about Socrates. And by putting the two paragraphs together, Strauss encourages us to consider the possibility that Xenophon thought that there was something too extreme about Socrates' abandonment of a certain kind of manly virtue, or, in other words, that Xenophon himself did not move all the way to the Socratic extreme but remained committed, in some way, to a more ordinary notion of manly virtue.

This does not mean that Xenophon sought out unnecessary risks, or that he was a manly hero in the most straightforward sense. To describe the matter in Homeric terms, Xenophon was no Achilles; he was much closer to Odysseus. Strauss makes this clear in the next paragraph. There he reports an episode in which Xenophon proposed to take the enemy position "not by means of a frontal attack but by means of a feint, of 'stealing'" (120; see *Anabasis* 4.6.10–15). He also speaks of "Xenophon's shrewd calculation, as distinguished from Cheirosophos' simple aggressiveness" (120). And, finally, Strauss points out that it was Xenophon's "*prudent counsel* which had saved the Greeks from the king's and the other barbarians' attempts to destroy them" (120, emphasis added). Like his piety, Xenophon's courage is hard to distinguish from a combination of toughness, wittiness, and wiliness.⁴ Or, to put the same point another way,

4 Strauss' most important statement on Xenophon's piety is on 118: "[I]f one wishes, one may also say that one of the virtues by which Xenophon distinguished himself was his piety,

the manly virtue that Xenophon stuck to was a form of it that never lost sight of the demands of prudence and self-protection. His virtue was not that of the younger Cyrus, who foolishly rushed into battle out of a desire for revenge against his brother.

Still, even if the limits or character of Xenophon's attachment to manly virtue may have had something to do with his having been a student of Socrates—as Strauss sometimes quietly indicates (see, e.g., 111, 112)—Strauss' primary point seems to be that Xenophon's partial commitment to such virtue was a point of genuine difference between him and Socrates. One outcome of this difference was that Xenophon was better able than Socrates to defend himself, especially when on trial (see 127, 135).⁵ Xenophon proved to have more control over his own fortune and fate than Socrates did. And that *may be* the sole reason that Xenophon decided not to follow the Socratic path. But Xenophon's divergence from Socrates may have gone beyond a desire for greater security, and perhaps also beyond his related desire for wealth. Although Strauss suggests that such motives guided Xenophon's initial decision to leave Athens in order to join the expedition with Cyrus,⁶ he also suggests that, when the opportunity arose, Xenophon was tempted by prospects much grander than the accumulation of wealth or the provision of security. Of particular importance is Strauss' account of Xenophon's ultimately aborted efforts to found a city in the Pontus (see 124–25). Strauss suggests that the prospect of founding a city did indeed tempt Xenophon and stir his ambitions. Xenophon was tempted, according to Strauss, both by prospect of the great honors that are awarded to founders of cities and by the supreme test of his talents for “speaking, thinking, and doing” that founding would demand (124, 126; see also 115).⁷

provided one adds that his piety is hard to distinguish from that combination of toughness, wittiness, and wiliness which separated him from Proxenos and which revealed itself already to some extent in the query addressed by him to the god in Delphi. It surely differs *toto caelo* from the piety of a Nikias.”

- 5 Xenophon was better able to defend himself when on trial because he could point to his many acts of manly virtue that did so much to help save the army: see *Anabasis* 5.8.18–26, 7.6.11–38. That is not to say, however, that Xenophon's actions and intentions were always above reproach (consider 125).
- 6 That the concern for wealth and security played the leading roles in Xenophon's initial decision to leave Athens to join Cyrus is well explained by Eric Buzzetti (2014) in his outstanding book on the *Anabasis* (see, in particular, 57–8, 113–17). Consider also Jacob Howland (2000) 884–85. See Strauss 115, 124. The key passage of the *Anabasis* is 3.1.4–19, which should be considered together with 5.3.4–13.
- 7 Consider *Anabasis* 5.6.15–37; cf. 6.4.1–8, 6.6.1–5.

Yet, even if Xenophon was sufficiently tempted by the prospect of founding a city that he was willing to consider abandoning his return to Greece and to risk the hostility of the Greek army when they learned of his less-than-patriotic plan, he was not drawn to all forms of rule, nor did he find it impossible to be satisfied without a position of political authority. Strauss suggests that Xenophon's eagerness to found a city in the Pontus was not matched by an equal eagerness to assume supreme command of the Greek army in the final stages of its struggle to return to Greece, a position that he turned away from, Strauss indicates, as a dangerous and toilsome burden (consider 126–31; see *Anabasis* 6.1.19–29).⁸ Strauss also urges us to keep in mind that Xenophon's plan to found a city failed (127)—and it may have failed in part because he was not so committed to it as to be willing to run every risk to bring it about.

Strauss' statement that Xenophon was more capable than Socrates of defending himself, coupled with and qualified by the reminder that he did not succeed in founding a city, leads into Strauss' longest statement on the difference between Xenophon and Socrates. This statement comes in a very difficult paragraph in which Strauss first compares Xenophon to the older Cyrus of the *Education of Cyrus*, a man whose political achievements far surpassed those of Xenophon (127–28). Strauss leads us to wonder what difference between Xenophon and the older Cyrus led to Cyrus' greater success. Strauss' initial suggestion seems to be that Cyrus had the advantage of lineage—"he was on both sides the heir of a long line of hereditary kings"—and, even if Xenophon possessed the advantage of superior knowledge, "knowledge of how to rule need[s] some iron alloy, some crude and rough admixture in order to become legitimate, i.e., politically viable" (128). But then, after making us think that

8 Strauss suggests that once Xenophon's plan to found a city met with serious resistance, political activity lost much of its allure for him. Consider Strauss' somewhat cryptic statement on 126, calling attention to a shift in Xenophon's own description of political activity after he encountered problems with his plan to found a city: "The tripartition 'speaking, fighting, being awake' takes the place of the tripartition 'speaking, thinking, doing' (v 6.28) but fighting now takes the place which thinking occupied in the earlier discussion, because thinking was there central for the reason given when we discussed that passage: 'thinking' is now replaced by 'being awake' since it is intended as 'worrying,' a special kind of thinking (*merimnai, phrontizein*)." See also 129: "For a moment one is tempted to believe that not the plan to become the founder of a Greek city in the Pontos but the election to supreme command of the whole army, to 'the monarchy' (vi 1.31), would have been the peak of Xenophon's ascent (cf. *Cyropaedia* viii 2.28; Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 115a32). But can 'monarchy' equal 'foundation' in grandeur, in sacredness?" To see Xenophon's attitude towards military command, it helps to contrast it with that of Clearchus (see *Anabasis* 2.6.1–15; cf. 5.3.4–13, Strauss 122).

the “iron alloy” he has in mind is simply the legitimacy conferred by lineage, Strauss reformulates in a strange way. He writes:

In a word, “justice” is an ambiguous term: it may mean the virtue of the man which consists in surpassing his friends in benefiting them and his enemies in harming them; but it may also mean the virtue of a Socrates whose justice consists in not harming anyone even in a little thing (128).

This is a strange summary, to say the least, of Strauss’ preceding point about the difference between Xenophon and the older Cyrus. But the connection as Strauss goes on to indicate, is that the more important difference between Xenophon and the older Cyrus was that, while both possessed the “virtue of a man,” Cyrus pushed it much further than Xenophon: Cyrus derived intense enjoyment from looking at the faces of his slain enemies (128). Cyrus’ attachment to manly virtue led him to an extreme of cruelty. And while Xenophon, too, was willing to be cruel, Strauss reminds us that “there is a great variety of degrees of cruelty.”⁹ And then Strauss makes his most important statement:

Xenophon stands somewhere in between the older Cyrus and Socrates. By this position he presents to us not a lack of decisiveness but the problem of justice: justice requires both the virtue of a man (and therewith the possible emancipation of cruelty) and the virtue of Socrates; the virtue of the man points to Socratic virtue and Socratic virtue requires as its foundation the virtue of the man; both kinds of virtue cannot coexist in their plenitude in one and the same human being. Xenophon may have regarded himself as the closest approximation best known to himself of their coexistence in one and the same human being. . . Surely, Xenophon (does not equal Plato) presents himself in his difference from Socrates (128).

This is a difficult statement that suggests something more complicated than that Xenophon tried to find a middle path between Cyrus and Socrates. For one thing, Strauss speaks of two kinds of virtue that do not stand in a relationship of simple equality: the virtue of the man “points to” Socratic virtue, whereas Socratic virtue “requires as its foundation” the virtue of the man. These formulations suggest that Xenophon, in Strauss’ view, accepted at least the core

⁹ Although there are several examples of Xenophon’s cruelty in the *Anabasis*, the most striking is 4.1.23–25. In this instance, as in the others, Xenophon does not delight in his cruelty or extend it beyond the bounds of what is necessary to accomplish the end he has in view.

of the Socratic critique of the virtue of the man; and Strauss provides other indications, both in this paragraph and elsewhere, that this was in fact the case. The influence of Socrates may be the most important reason why Xenophon's cruelty never took the extreme form that Cyrus' did. But more important for present purposes is the issue in the other direction: Did Xenophon somehow think that Socrates did not sufficiently appreciate the necessary foundation of any kind of life—even the Socratic life—in a kind of manly toughness? Was he more willing than Socrates to compromise his Socratic virtue—if only by how he spent a part of his life—for the sake of ends other than the Socratic end of knowledge? And what exactly were those other ends? Again, was he primarily seeking greater security and wealth? Was he more deeply concerned with honor? Or was it also the thrill and challenge of political action that attracted him?

Strauss does not give us all that much help on these questions, although he does point us at the end of the paragraph just considered to a passage from his book on the *Memorabilia*, *Xenophon's Socrates* (128). The passage that he seems to have in mind is one in which he says, speaking of another of Xenophon's Socratic writings, "the *Symposium* reveals itself as devoted not merely to Socrates' playful deeds but simply to his deeds: his deed, as distinguished from his speech and his thought, is nothing but playful" (Strauss 1972, 144). Strauss then follows this statement with one of his signature single-sentence, enigmatic paragraphs: "Xenophon claims to have been present at the banquet" (Strauss 1972, 144). What I take that sentence to mean is that Xenophon quietly presents himself as an *alternative* to Socrates, as a man for whom it was *not true* that his deed, as distinguished from his speech and his thought, is nothing but playful. And this suggestion about the *Symposium* finds a broader parallel in Xenophon's *corpus* as a whole, which gives center stage to the thought of Socrates but includes a place for the actions of Xenophon himself. Perhaps Xenophon simply was not convinced that thought alone, or the philosophic life in the strictest sense, would provide him with greater satisfaction than he could find in a life that included a place for political action. Perhaps he knew by his own experience that, for a man with his nature, a Socratic education need not deprive political ends of all of their attraction. But Strauss leaves his readers—or at least this reader—wondering whether Xenophon understood the difference between himself and Socrates as a mark of his superiority, his inferiority, or merely his somewhat different nature.

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Divine Justice in Strauss' *Anabasis*

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1

This is a brief attempt to address the question of the gods in Strauss' interpretation of *The Anabasis*.¹ The question of god or gods is of course central to all of Strauss' mature work, and the theme "gods and men" is, Strauss tells us, "the . . . in a sense comprehensive theme" of the *Anabasis*, and hence of Strauss' interpretation of it. This should come as no surprise to readers of the *Anabasis*, a work that appears to present Xenophon, a Socratic, in an extraordinarily pious light—consulting soothsayers, reading the entrails of sacrificial victims, offering libations, and so on. Xenophon the Greek general sometimes seems to surpass all others in his observances of sacral law. Now, the truth about the gods whom Xenophon appears to have worshipped was of more than historical concern to Strauss. And the reason is suggested by *The Anabasis*' account of the story of Marsayias, who is said to have been severely punished by Apollo after first challenging and then failing to defeat Apollo in a contest in wisdom (107–08). The story highlights the gravity of the question of how we should lead our lives. Do we do so by the wisdom given through allegedly divine revelation, or by our own reason, however limited its power? As Strauss argues elsewhere, no question is more important than this one.² Moreover, despite what we would today call "cultural differences" (some people, as Xenophon points out, worship fish), there was an important respect in which peoples as different as the Greeks and their barbarian enemies shared the same understanding of god or gods, namely, as beings who rule over human beings in accord with justice.

Yet if the theme "gods and men" is both comprehensive and grave, the initial impression one is likely to receive from Strauss' examination of this theme in *The Anabasis* does not suggest gravity. In fact, Strauss goes to some lengths

1 Strauss (1983). All parenthetical page references in the body of this essay are to this work. I wish to thank Thomas and Lorraine Pangle, with whom I joined in a reading group on Strauss' study of the *Anabasis*. I also wish to thank Wayne Ambler and Dustin Gish for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay. Remaining errors are of course my own.

2 Strauss (1953) 74–5; Strauss (1965) 1, 15; Strauss (1957), 22; Strauss (1989) 269–70, Strauss (1959) 86.

to show us that Xenophon's piety is not what it might first seem to our contemporaries, or that it resembles the piety of a Boccaccio. He even appears to suggest that the question of the gods' existence and their justice is easily settled, or rather easily dismissed. After explaining some of Xenophon's logographic devices, the first example Strauss gives that brings all of these devices together is of Menon, the "unbelievably wicked" Thessalian general. Menon is not punished for his perjury by any god, and the story that he was not put to death immediately, as were the other Greek generals, but tortured for a year by the Persian King, whom he had benefited by his treachery, is, Strauss shows Xenophon indicating, a fairy tale. It represents a magnification and adornment of the truth; it satisfies readers' sense of justice, or attracts a reader who wishes to believe such tales, but is not in itself credible.

Similarly, Strauss points out that after Xenophon claims to have had a dream sent from Zeus, a dream that might suggest divine punishment for the Greeks who had come against the Persian king, Xenophon nonetheless delivers a speech that lifts the Greeks' hopes for divine aid by declaring the Persians to be in violation of their solemnly sworn treaty. And while Xenophon stresses in that speech that the gods will judge the contest and be on the side of the Greeks, he all but drops that argument in his second speech, which is addressed to the Greek commanders, emphasizing instead that "everything in war depends" not on any god but on something strictly human: "good order and discipline" (113). Xenophon's prudence is often hidden and made publicly defensible by a belief in divine justice to which he himself does not subscribe but which he freely exploits. The prudent use of his listeners' piety likewise characterizes, Strauss suggests, Xenophon's later speeches rejecting sole command of the Greek forces. Again, that Zeus terrified the inhabitants of a Median city by causing thunder is merely "said" but not "known" (116). And Xenophon repeatedly leads the Greeks to victory "by drawing on his knowledge of things military" (115; cf. 118 bottom, 126), or on his good counsel and guesswork (131–32). Xenophon tells the Greeks at Kalpe harbor that "perhaps the god wishes to arrange things . . . so that those who talked big are humbled;" Strauss observes that Xenophon *himself* "made of course all the necessary arrangements." Again, when the Greeks are at a loss as to how to cross a well-guarded river into Armenia, Xenophon allegedly has another dream of good omen, and the sacrifices he offers the next day are favorable, but Strauss highlights Xenophon's hints that he was approached in the night by two soldiers with information about a hidden ford in the river, soldiers whom Xenophon had re-approach him in the morning, after he had told the commanders of his "dream" and had offered the sacrifices. Or at the very least, he highlights the fact that Xenophon, unlike the Spartan Cheirosophos, made himself available to any who might have useful

information (118). The lavish display of piety that accompanies the river crossing even moves Strauss to declare that while Xenophon distinguished himself by his piety, “his piety is hard to distinguish from [a] combination of toughness, wittiness, and wiliness” (118; cf. 111).

Finally, while Xenophon attempts to get his troops out of a subsequent scrape, someone sets fire to a house—“god only knows how and why,” says Strauss, with perhaps the most conspicuous wink in all his work—and Xenophon tells the reader that “some god” did it, and then changes the cause of the fire to “chance,” prompting Strauss to declare bluntly, “Deus sive casus,”—“a god or more accurately, chance” (121, bottom). Shortly thereafter Strauss suggests that the rule of any god over humans would be despotic rule, from which wily enslaved humans would work to free themselves, and then declares that the attribution of omniscience to the gods is merely “part of a human ruse, of human flattering” (122, top). It is no wonder that Strauss concludes that Xenophon’s prudent counsel, and no god, is responsible for the salvation of the Greeks from the barbarians and the Spartans (120, 133). The overall impression one might take from this essay, then, is that Xenophon was not only very wily, but above all boyishly witty, writing a work to serve as high level instruction for non-believers everywhere on how to succeed in handling certain political necessities by using the deluded pious wishes of one’s subordinates, and the services of soothsayers who can be bought and paid for.

This initial impression of Strauss’ reading of the *Anabasis* is not, it seems to me, completely misleading. But it is at best only half the story—a tempting but not accurate impression. In fact, as soon as he has declared that the attribution of omniscience to the gods is “part of a human ruse, of human flattering” (122, top), Strauss draws back from this conclusion. To genuinely escape from the possible rule of gods, a “great difficulty . . . here remains in Xenophon or his Socrates.” That difficulty, faced by the Socratic Xenophon (as opposed to Proxenus, who was educated by Gorgias) is that the pious man knows what is established by laws regarding the gods, but never raises the question “what is law?” What Strauss seems to mean by this very puzzling statement is this: What characterizes the serious, pious human being is unquestioning obedience to commands that in their demand for noble sacrifice of our good elicit what is best in us and perhaps even speak to what is divine in us, just as disobedience of such commands elicits a dreadful guilt or internal shame. And so such a one would find the questioning that a Socrates pursued to be wrong and even punishable (as Apollo punished Marsayas). More puzzling is that Strauss flatly states now that this great difficulty “cannot be resolved within the context of an interpretation of the *Anabasis*.” Now, given that Strauss himself has called “gods and men” the comprehensive theme of the *Anabasis*, this is a

rather startling statement. It would seem to render the essay, or at least its second half, superfluous or off-topic. One might even expect the essay to conclude here, unless something of a resolution of the difficulty, which Strauss' reader is perhaps more eager or better disposed now to hear, is in fact forthcoming in the second half of the essay.

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The essay holds at least the beginning of a resolution of this difficulty, and I'd like to turn now to some of its highlights. A sentence immediately follows upon and qualifies Strauss' claim that the difficulty he has described cannot be overcome in the present context; that sentence begins to suggest a possible way out. "It would be simpler," Strauss says, "and less simple to say that Xenophon or his Socrates never raise the still more fundamental question, 'what is a god?' (122t; cf. Strauss [1964], conclusion). Strauss here seems to present the question "what is law?" as a less simple version of the question 'what is a god?' But how or in what way can this be?

Law, Strauss here suggests, consists above all in commands that the pious believe to be given or at least authorized by a god—commands that require the kind of unquestioning, selfless obedience that makes a citizen a trustworthy, reliable, loyal son of his fatherland. The breach of such laws is impiety (toward god) or injustice (toward men). Now as it happens, the theme of the rest of Strauss' interpretation of the *Anabasis* is justice to one's fatherland: Xenophon deserving to be the founder of a Greek city, then deserving to be a "monarch" over the Greeks, and finally and above all, Xenophon's devoted service or lack thereof to his fatherland. And if we return to Strauss' statement about the overriding theme of the work, we see that there too, Strauss stresses that the comprehensive theme of the *Anabasis* is not gods and men, but divine support for *justice* (108). Could an investigation of justice, then, provide a means to the resolution of the great difficulty that Strauss has spoken of? It is certainly striking that Strauss, who elsewhere speaks of "the problem of divine law" or "the problem of justice" as the "common ground" between believers and non-believers,³ declares that Xenophon, in standing "somewhere in between" the justice of the older Cyrus and the justice of Socrates, "presents to us not a lack of decisiveness but *the problem of justice*" (128, emphasis added).

3 "The problem of divine law": Strauss (1952) 248; cf. 246. See also Strauss (1951). "The problem of justice": Strauss (1953), 150n24; cf. 156. See also 275–76, and see Strauss (1964) 38–39, 127 (top), and 129.

Strauss begins his extended treatment of Xenophon's justice, of his devotion to his fatherland, with the observation that Xenophon gives "a signal proof of his justice" by presenting his possible recourse to war in alliance with barbarians against Greek Sinopens "as an act of sheer self-defense." This signal proof of Xenophon's justice is, however, highly problematic; the publicly acceptable exculpating appeal to self-preservation contains the troubling implication that justice must bow to one's own good: why, after all, is defense of oneself so compelling a concern as to make it impossible to sacrifice one's life in deference to the prohibition against taking innocent life (cf. 4.1.23–26)? And this means that justice is admittedly binding—in the way that the just and pious devotees of law claim it is—only and insofar as it is thought somehow to serve one's own good.

Having begun his investigation of Xenophon's justice in this troubling way, Strauss then turns to Xenophon's abortive attempt to found a Greek city. The soothsayer whom Xenophon consults on the matter finds the sacrifices are indeed favorable for such a founding, but he betrays Xenophon, who he thinks is thinking not of Greece but "solely of his own name and power," that is, selfishly and hence unjustly, contrary to the common good of the Greeks. But as Strauss emphasizes, the reader has heard from Xenophon that the founding of the city, and hence increasing the power of Greece, is something that Xenophon considers "resplendent" (*kalos*), something high or noble, in the light of which Xenophon's professed reason for coming on the expedition—to obtain wealth for himself—appears "frivolous" (124). It is this just and noble reader to whom Strauss addresses the following remarks:

Granted that the founding of a great Greek city in some barbaric place (Plato, *Republic* 499c9) would have redounded to Xenophon's name and power, was that name and power not amply deserved? Would his action not have been beneficial, not only to him but to Greece and hence to the human race? Had he not justly and piously performed anything, and more than anything, that one could expect...? Xenophon was fit to the highest degree not only to be the supreme commander of the army but to become the founder of a city, worthy of the greatest honor during his life and especially after his death: the honors awarded to the founder of a city. That highest and so well deserved honor is snatched away from him not by any divine ill will but by a greedy soothsayer. (124–125)

In other words, it would appear that precisely the just and noble reader is bound to be disappointed by the failure of the gods to give Xenophon what he deserved and thereby benefit not only Xenophon or even only the Greeks but "the human race."

Yet such a disappointment would not by itself shake the conviction of the devout Greek. As Strauss says next, "perhaps we have not paid sufficient attention to the true difficulty." That difficulty proves to be not any speech or deed of Xenophon, but a far more hidden *thought* of Xenophon, which comes out in Xenophon's failure to answer a "grave, if implicit charge: was the thought that one can esteem a barbarian prince or king more highly than one's fatherland not an act of profound injustice, perhaps even the root of Xenophon's injustice?" As Strauss goes on to argue, Xenophon successfully defended himself against the soothsayer's charge of serving his own interest at the expense of the Greek soldiers' interest. And, he adds, Xenophon's consultation with the soothsayer concerning the founding of a Greek city makes quite clear that because the gods didn't oppose it, there was nothing "wrong" with thinking about founding a city (125). But, Strauss points out, Xenophon's successful defense in this matter makes only the more obvious his original failure to consult the god at Delphi concerning the justice of seeking to benefit himself by befriending the barbarian Cyrus, or more generally, of "esteeming something more highly than Greece" (127, bottom).

Strauss' account of the answer to this difficulty—this apparent injustice on Xenophon's part, an injustice for which the all-seeing gods might punish him—takes up the remainder of the essay. Very briefly, Strauss' answer is the following: The reader is for a time tempted to believe that the gods wished to reward Xenophon with "monarchy" over the Greek troops, but if they do, this episode is troubling for divine justice, since, as Strauss brings out, Xenophon's possible election to monarchy bears directly on the question of "fidelity to Greece as the sole or most important ingredient of justice" (130). The "Greece" over which Xenophon would have deserved to rule proves to be divided into two hostile cities, Sparta and Athens, and even further divided into Achaians and Arcadians (131), and finally, divided even within the hegemonic Sparta. "Given the intra-Spartan jealousies, fidelity to Sparta and hence to Greece was not easy, if not altogether impossible" (134, bottom). Fidelity to the common good of Greece is in practice impossible owing to the primacy of individuals' pursuit of their perceived individual good. The example Xenophon provides of what gets in the way of a genuine common good is as limited to Greece as is the phenomenon of jealous wrangling over who deserves to rule, the settling of which will leave some cities subject or enslaved to others. As Xenophon had learned from Socrates, the strict justice that the pious Xenophon pursues proves to be impossible. But to learn just how it is so, *necessarily*, and not simply owing to the greedy selfishness of bad men, we would need to turn to Xenophon's Socratic writings.

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PART 5

Plato



Leo Strauss on the Politics of Plato's *Republic*

Linda R. Rabieh

Leo Strauss' commentary "On Plato's *Republic*,"¹ the second of three chapters in *The City and Man*, can be properly understood only if it is studied as a work of philosophy in its own right. Critic and friend alike have called the essay difficult as well as critical to understanding Strauss' view of classical political philosophy.² Although on first impression the essay may appear merely to summarize the *Republic*, sustained attention dispels that impression. To state an obvious indication that the essay is no mere summary, Strauss devotes much more attention to some parts of the *Republic* than to others: of the 76 pages treating the dialogue itself, more than one third (29) are devoted to the first book and a half of the *Republic's* ten books. Furthermore, Strauss altogether ignores some of the dialogue's most famous passages, such as the accounts of the divided line in Book VI and the education of philosophers in Book VII.

Perhaps the most puzzling feature of Strauss' essay, however, is that it never clearly answers the most obvious question in the *Republic*, namely, "What is justice?" Even when discussing the *Republic's* treatment of philosophy, which treatment Strauss says is needed to understand the "essence of justice" (115; cf. 122), he says only that this section "transmits the answer to the question regarding justice *to the extent to which* that answer is given in the *Republic*" (127, emphasis added; cf. 138). The limitation on the *Republic's* teaching about justice is connected with what Strauss indicates throughout are the two notions of justice that Socrates is charged with defending: justice is both the greatest good for oneself *and* dedication to the good of others (see 77, 83, 91, 115, 128).³ The tension between these two notions of justice is reflected in the fact that, as Strauss notes, the philosopher turns out to be the only just individual (109, 122, 127) but remains at odds even with the just city (112, 125). It is thus not surprising that Strauss states, in the final paragraph of his essay, that the *Republic*

* I am grateful to Anna Schmidt, Nasser Behnegar, Robert Bartlett, Tim Burns, and Lisa Leibowitz for their thoughts and suggestions on the arguments here.

1 Strauss 1964. All parenthetical references to page numbers, unless indicated, are to this text.

2 See Klosko 1986 and Benardete 1978, 1, 5, 20.

3 For an excellent discussion of the two notions of justice and the relation between them see Stauffer 2001.

brings to light the essential limits of the city, and, implicitly, of justice (138)—the virtue “most obviously related to the city” (106). Yet in the same paragraph Strauss also says that, “by presenting Socrates’ taming of Thrasymachus as an act of justice, [the *Republic*] lets us see justice” (138). Strauss thus indicates that whatever the *Republic* teaches about the limitations of justice, it also shows justice in action, at least through Socrates’ exchange with Thrasymachus. Indeed, Strauss devotes significant attention to Thrasymachus throughout the essay, and his concluding reference to Socrates’ taming of Thrasymachus indicates that, for Strauss, this taming is critical for understanding the *Republic*’s treatment of justice, the relationship between the philosopher and the city, and the connection between these themes.

1 Thrasymachus and the Importance of Politics

Strauss devotes by far the greatest part of his discussion of Book I to Socrates’ exchange with Thrasymachus, going out of his way in discussing this passage to soften the harsh portrait that Socrates paints of Thrasymachus. Socrates initially describes Thrasymachus as “hunched up like a wild beast” (336b4)⁴ and needing to be restrained in his fury at what he takes to be the tricky rhetoric that Socrates uses with Polemarchus (71–72; cf. 335b–e). Strauss addresses his readers directly, exhorting us “not to behave angrily” and to look “without indignation” at Thrasymachus’ indignation (74–75). As we will also see, he proceeds to rehabilitate Thrasymachus’ definition of justice and to emphasize that what appears to be Socrates’ rhetorical victory over Thrasymachus conceals an important agreement between the two.

Strauss also suggests that Thrasymachus’ argument plays a crucial role in the drama of the dialogue. It is Thrasymachus’ attack on justice and Socrates’ response to it, he says, that prompt Glaucon’s famous speech and the resulting thought experiment that sets the agenda for the rest of the dialogue (85). But there is a subtler indication of Thrasymachus’ importance to the *Republic* as a whole. Strauss points out that if one divides the dialogue according to Socrates’ principal interlocutors, Thrasymachus is the central figure. Socrates first converses with Cephalus and Polemarchus, then with Thrasymachus, and finally with Glaucon and Adeimantus (74; see also 123–24). Thrasymachus thus provides the transition from Socrates’ investigation into what is justice to the defense of justice through the city in speech (106). Understanding that

4 All Stephanus page numbers are to Plato’s *Republic*. Translations are from Bloom 1991.

transition, Strauss seems to suggest, can help us understand the peculiar form the rest of the dialogue takes.

Strauss, though, does not treat Thrasymachus as serving only a transitional role. Although Thrasymachus hardly speaks in the rest of the dialogue (see 450a–b for the only other time), Strauss returns to him and emphasizes the importance of his few subsequent appearances. Strauss describes the transition to Book v, which brings philosophy explicitly to the fore, as a “new beginning,” made possible because Thrasymachus has been “converted” into a citizen of the city in speech (115–16). Later, when considering whether rule by philosophers is possible, Strauss again highlights his role, noting that Socrates says he and Thrasymachus have “become friends” just when he is explaining what would be required for the city to tolerate philosophy (123–4). Finally, Strauss returns to Thrasymachus at the end of the essay to distinguish his way of life from Socrates’ (129) and to insist that Thrasymachus’ friendship and rhetorical ability are especially important in view of the political theme of the *Republic* (134).

Strauss foreshadows Thrasymachus’ importance to his essay in its introduction. In describing the dramatic context of the *Republic*, Strauss underlines the dialogue’s political character, noting that the *Republic* is the most famous political work of all time and the most famous of Plato’s four dialogues whose titles reveal their “preponderantly political” subject matter (56, 62). Strauss then describes the political circumstances in which the drama takes place. He notes that the dialogue occurs when Athens is in decay, that such times lead people to think about “the restoration of political health,” and that Socrates, Glaucon and Adeimantus all “prove to be greatly concerned with [Athenian] decay and to think of the restoration of political health” (63). Strauss indicates that the question of restoration is not merely theoretical; he reminds us that Socrates is linked “by kinship or friendship” to men who attempted an actual restoration, whom Strauss strangely identifies as “the *so-called* Thirty Tyrants” (*id.*; emphasis added). Furthermore, and in contrast to all historical accounts, Strauss describes this revolt as an attempt to restore an “aristocratic regime dedicated to virtue and justice” (*id.*). Strauss does not elaborate here, but he surely expects the reader to recall that one of the revolt’s leaders, Critias, a cousin of Plato, had associated with Socrates and that this association was sufficiently problematic that Xenophon explicitly attempted to absolve Socrates of responsibility for Critias’ actions (see *Memorabilia*, 1.2). Strauss’ peculiar description seems designed to suggest that however terrible were its results, the revolt itself may have been inspired by a certain political idealism, which may in turn have been inspired by some exposure to philosophy. Philosophy, it seems, can be dangerous to the city.

Strauss also indicates that the problem is mutual: politics can also be dangerous to philosophy. He notes that the interlocutors in the *Republic*, including Polemarchus, who went on to become a philosopher (see *Phaedrus* 257b3–4), were victims of that attempted restoration. Indeed, Socrates' own life was in danger during that "restoration," because he refused orders to deliver Leon of Salamis to his execution. But politics is dangerous not only in its idealism. The democratic principle of majority rule poses its own threat, represented dramatically by the playful "arrest" of Socrates at the beginning of the *Republic* that, at least partly, explains why Socrates' participation in the subsequent conversation is not "altogether voluntary" (63; cf. 59).

By drawing attention to the urgent political considerations with which philosophers cannot avoid concerning themselves for the sake of city, friends, and selves (cf. 128), Strauss prepares us for the possibility that the *Republic* shows philosophy addressing such considerations. Indeed, Strauss reports that Glaucon, who is said to have possessed "extreme political ambition" at the time of the conversation in the *Republic*, did not participate in the "restoration," around twenty years later (65). In the same context, Strauss claims that the *Republic* is the "most magnificent cure ever devised for every form of political ambition" (65), raising the possibility that the conversation in the *Republic* was at least partially responsible for curing Glaucon of his ambition. But Glaucon is only one individual. Is there more that philosophy can and even must do to affect politics? By prompting this question, Strauss sets the stage for the importance of Thrasymachus and his art of rhetoric. In the rest of this essay, we will focus on Thrasymachus to discover what Strauss teaches about the tension between the city and the philosopher and the extent to which this tension can be resolved.

2 Thrasymachus and the Angry City

Thrasymachus' prominent role in the *Republic* occurs in Book I when he debates Socrates on the meaning of justice and is maneuvered, by Socrates, into offering the last of the three definitions of justice presented in Book I. Strauss divides the discussion between the two into two parts. He treats Thrasymachus in the first part as personifying the city and its views and, in the second part, as a rhetorician, whose interests are not identical to the city's. Strauss initially focuses on Thrasymachus' entry into the dialogue and on his infamous definition of justice as "the advantage of the stronger" (338c1–2). After paraphrasing Socrates' description of Thrasymachus when the latter enters the dialogue as angry, savage, lawless and shameless (74), Strauss says that Thrasymachus

offers "the most savage thesis on justice," that justice is "good only for the receiver and bad for the giver" and is therefore "folly" (*id.*). Strauss then immediately undercuts his initial presentation and claims that Thrasymachus' definition, which seems to contradict any ordinary understanding of justice, is in fact not only the "most obvious, most natural thesis regarding justice" but is even "highly respectable" (75).

Indeed, Strauss says provocatively, Thrasymachus' definition of justice is the "thesis of the city itself" (*id.*). At the heart of this claim is the identification of the just with the legal, which identification, Strauss argues, is made by *every* city. Strauss' claim is surprising in light of the fact that people often speak of laws as unjust, which necessarily means that they believe justice is not exhausted by law but, rather, is a standard above law.⁵ Recognizing this phenomenon, Strauss says that no city genuinely "permits an appeal from its laws," for even when there is an appeal to a so-called "higher law," it must be interpreted by an authority recognized by the city (75, 76). The buck stops with the city.

If the just is the legal, however, this does not necessarily mean that justice is the advantage of the stronger. To be sure, if the "stronger" element is the legislator and justice is the law, there is something to be said for identifying justice with the advantage of the stronger. Does not, though, the city at least claim to look to the *common* good? On what basis does Strauss suggest either that it does not make this claim or that the claim is erroneous or disingenuous? Strauss prompts such questions by stating that "[o]ne might think that the regime *could* lay down the laws with a view to the common good of ruler and ruled" (76; emphasis added). But he explains that to aim at the common good is to aim at what is "by nature just," which is something good "intrinsically and not merely by virtue of enactment or agreement" (*id.*); this, he says conflicts with the thesis of the city. But does every city maintain the "thesis of the city" as articulated, according to Strauss, by Thrasymachus? Cannot the city aim at a natural common good?⁶ Strauss' suggestion seems to be that it cannot because, to the extent that a natural *common* good exists, it would be effective "intrinsically," without "enactment or agreement," so that law and politics

5 Consider Antigone's appeal to divine justice with respect to the burial of her brother (Sophocles, *Antigone* 450–59).

6 The possibility of a natural common good, where dedication to the city does not conflict with one's own good, is explored in the creation of the just city. Even in the first "healthy" or "true" city (372e5), though, we see a problem: aside from the facts that this city aims only at providing the necessities of life and requires no soldiers for defense, the natural common good it advances demands perfect harmony between citizens' abilities and needs (see 94).

come into play only to address deficiencies with respect to the common good.⁷ In other words, if the common good were both naturally good and truly common, it would not need to be enforced by law.

When elaborating the “thesis of the city” Strauss indicates grave problems with the city’s view that justice is “primarily and essentially legality” (76): “justice or obedience to the laws is necessarily to the advantage of the ruled *and bad* for them,” and “as for the rulers, justice simply does not exist” (76; emphasis added). The latter formulation may be understood as follows: because the law is crafted for the rulers’ benefit, justice, at least in the sense of compulsory obedience to the law, is irrelevant to them, because they do not need to be compelled to act in accordance with their own advantage. With respect to the ruled, though, how can justice be both to their advantage *and* bad for them? If the law does not look to their good insofar as they are not among the rulers, it is, in that sense, bad for them. But insofar as those who break the law are punished, it is to the advantage of the ruled to obey the law in the sense that they thereby escape punishment. However, if this is the *only* benefit the ruled derive from law-abidingness, the clear implication is that where they can escape punishment, the ruled should pursue their own good without regard for the law.⁸ In other words, what Strauss calls the thesis of the city provides a perfectly legitimate argument for refusing to acknowledge the city’s authority. Hence, Strauss concludes, “the thesis of the city . . . destroys itself” (76).

Strauss next reconsiders the definitions of justice offered in Book I in light of the problem with the city’s thesis. He says that Cephalus’ initial opinion about justice (giving or restoring to each what belongs to him) is “only a subdivision of justice in Thrasymachus’ sense” (76). Both Cephalus and Thrasymachus thus articulate the thesis of the city; the just is the legal. Against this view, Strauss suggests, is Polemarchus’ definition of justice as “helping one’s friends as fellow citizens . . . dedicating oneself to the common good” (*id.*). Polemarchus represents the view that not the law but wisdom, which can determine what is good for each, should be authoritative.⁹ Strauss’ strange interpretation of

7 One might say that law may still be necessary to compel those who do not adequately understand their own good to act in accordance with it. Strauss claims, however, that justice understood as law “does not aim at a natural good which can only be an individual’s good” (76; cf. 77 and the reference to *Minos* 317d3ff).

8 As noted below, Strauss says one does this either by escaping punishment whenever one can with the help of rhetoric or by becoming tyrant, so as to pursue one’s own good without restraint (76).

9 But compare the question Strauss raises about Polemarchus’ position, namely, whether it is “compatible with the concern for the natural good of each” (76–77).

Thrasymachus' definition of justice as the "thesis of the city" has permitted him to organize the three definitions of justice into two groups: justice as the law, on one hand, and justice as wise distribution of goods, on the other. This means that Thrasymachus has become the spokesman not for a "savage thesis" that the city would certainly deny, but for the city itself and the respectable position that justice is law-abidingness. Strauss places Socrates in the camp with Polemarchus, because "on the primary level [they] belong together as defenders of the common good" (77). Strauss thus places Socrates squarely at odds with the city and its view of the just as the legal—but, at least arguably, in the morally superior camp.

Having now identified Thrasymachus with the city and Socrates as at odds with it, Strauss focuses on Thrasymachus' anger at Socrates and particularly on how Thrasymachus, in accusing Socrates of being "tricky" and "ungrateful," establishes himself as "a man of the highest authority" who represents the city (77–78) against the apolitical conclusions to which Socrates steers the conversation. Just prior to Thrasymachus' initial outburst, Socrates and Polemarchus had agreed that justice is good and therefore will not result in harm to the just man or others (335e4–5; 75). From the city's point of view, this claim conflicts with the demands of political life, since all cities have enemies whom cities require to be harmed on occasion. In addition, the city may also object to the agreement between Socrates and Polemarchus that justice *must* be good for the just man as well as for others (see 335c5–6), for if this is so, then obeying the law cannot be just wherever the law does not advance one's good. The conclusion Socrates and Polemarchus reach undermines the city just as much as the "thesis of the city" does. What follows from both is this: "[p]rudence requires either that one disobey the laws whenever one can escape punishment . . . or else that one become a tyrant since only the tyrant can pursue his own good without any regard whatever for others" (76). Whether justice is understood as Socrates and Polemarchus do (as good for both the just man and the recipient of justice) or as Thrasymachus, in Strauss' interpretation, does (as law-abidingness), the city's authority is under attack.

If Socrates brings Polemarchus to a position against which the city cannot defend itself, its hostility to Socrates is not surprising. Strauss captures this hostility in his presentation of Thrasymachus here as, so to speak, the city's prosecutor. As such, Thrasymachus does not attack Socrates for raising a troubling truth; rather, he accuses him of injustice. Based on his (or perhaps the "city's") previous experiences of Socrates, Thrasymachus is certain that Socrates is not forthright but is, rather, "clever and tricky" (76; cf. 51–52). He accuses Socrates of not playing fair, of benefitting himself at others' expense in the argument.

By identifying Thrasymachus' definition of justice with the city's and by presenting his anger as the city's, Strauss illuminates the tension between *Socrates* and the city, particularly the tension aroused through Socrates' ability to win over the young, as he does with Polemarchus (77). The civic authorities dimly grasp that Socratic investigations challenge the city's authority, which is vulnerable, as we have seen, on its own terms. But Thrasymachus differs from the city. Almost immediately after articulating what Strauss calls the thesis of the city, Thrasymachus backs away from it and argues instead that rulers are genuine rulers only if they are like skilled craftsmen (350b–e) and *know* how to rule well. Strauss' analysis of this new claim beings the second part of his treatment of Thrasymachus, in which Strauss says that Thrasymachus "only plays" the city; Thrasymachus' views are not the same as the city's. Here Strauss brings out how precisely because Thrasymachus is not the city's partisan or its true representative, Thrasymachus is Socrates' potential ally and may be able to help Socrates address the city's antagonism towards him. Socrates explores Thrasymachus' view of art, the thing about which Strauss says Thrasymachus is serious (85), as a first step in developing an understanding between them. The effect of this first step is to tame Thrasymachus.

3 Thrasymachus Tamed

By the end of Book I, Strauss says, Thrasymachus has been completely tamed by Socrates (84). His taming appears in the facts that he no longer tries to teach but, rather, becomes a "willing listener and subordinate of Socrates" (*id.*). Strauss says that this constitutes a "marvelous victory" for Socrates (84). Yet he also says that Socrates does not obtain victory by refuting Thrasymachus' argument and that Thrasymachus "has in no way become convinced by Socrates of the goodness of justice" (*id.*). On what, then, does Socrates' victory rest and how does Socrates begin to turn Thrasymachus from the city's advocate into someone who might be his own?

Socrates' appeal begins when Thrasymachus, in response to Socrates' suggestion that rulers sometimes err concerning their own advantage, insists that the name "ruler" applies only to what he calls a "craftsman," or one who rules without error; the "craftsman" rules *knowing* his own advantage (i.e., is a knower "in precise speech" [340e1]). To be sure, Thrasymachus' clarification here accords with his profession; his livelihood depends on rulers hiring him to teach them something, so there must be knowledge to teach. But his clarification also sheds light on his own views. By "craftsman" or "artisan," Thrasymachus

means above all someone with *knowledge*, a wise man (340e1–41a4; 78). Insofar as he prides himself on his art, it is because he possesses some knowledge (80). Socrates, however, uses Thrasymachus' identification of the knower with the craftsman to transform Thrasymachus' notion of the "knower in the strict sense" into that of the "artisan in the strict sense" (78). The result is to characterize knowledge as strictly aiming at practical effects. The model is medicine (see 341e), not biology.

Having agreed that artisans in the precise sense look to the good of the objects of their arts, Thrasymachus seems forced to concede that rulers in the precise sense look to the good of the ruled, which concession appears to lead to his downfall (79, 80). But his downfall is only apparent, says Strauss (81), for Thrasymachus forces Socrates to make a concession of his own. He chides Socrates for naively assuming that the artisan or ruler, looks to another's good rather than, as does the shepherd, to his own and his master's good (343b–44c), and Socrates responds by noting that in addition to their specific arts, artisans must practice the "wage earner's art" in order to ensure their own good. Socrates' limited concession has far-reaching consequences. In explaining the need for the "wage earner's art" to bring benefits to the artisan, Socrates cites the wages that rulers demand because "no one willingly chooses to rule and get mixed up in straightening out other people's troubles" (346e8–10; cf. 347d2–8). Socrates thus implicitly adopts Thrasymachus' principle by acknowledging the primacy of one's own good (81, 82). Strauss calls this turn of events "devastating" to Socrates and says that the three "radically inadequate" subsequent arguments Socrates proceeds to make in defense of the goodness of justice are needed to counter or cover over this concession (83). Thus, although we are left with the overall impression that Socrates has refuted Thrasymachus and that whatever justice is, Socrates remains staunchly on its side, by the end of Book I, Thrasymachus' principle that "the private good is supreme" is firmly intact (81, 82).

If Thrasymachus' principle has triumphed, his reasoning, according to Strauss, is defective (82, 84). Strauss points out that Thrasymachus fails to see that the primacy of the private good, even, or perhaps especially, the private good of a tyrant, requires a certain sort of justice (82). This is evident in Thrasymachus' own art, which *requires* that he gratify or benefit others; even if his own good is paramount to him, he must provide some benefit to his ruler-clients to keep getting business (81). Surely Thrasymachus realizes that he must do his job well to benefit from his art and that in doing so he helps, or at least must appear to help, others. But might he wish he could *avoid* this necessity? Strauss suggests as much when he says that Thrasymachus differs

from Socrates in thinking that justice is “an unnecessary evil” (83). Indeed, Thrasymachus appears to admire tyranny because he believes the tyrant alone is free to pursue his private good without restraint (344a–c).

Thrasymachus’ admiration of tyranny, however, is limited. He does not follow the logic of his own reasoning: he does not himself pursue tyranny but, rather, teaches rhetoric to others. Thrasymachus’ principle is that one’s own good is primary and that injustice is the best means to it. Strauss, however, notes that since the effective pursuit of goods requires joining others to obtain their help, the “art of arts” would be the art of war, in which members of the political community cooperate with each other to wage war and thereby secure for themselves all the ordinary goods that a city needs (82). But Strauss then says that Thrasymachus cannot think of his art as this “art of arts or of himself as the ruler tyrannical or non-tyrannical” (*id.*). Thrasymachus then does not think of himself as a tyrant, even a would-be tyrant. He does not wish to rule in any way, which is puzzling for someone who so openly praises tyranny (344a–c).

In what sense, then, does Thrasymachus, as Strauss puts it, “take seriously his art” (85)? As we have seen, for Thrasymachus, the “artisan in the precise sense,” the artisan he admires, is the knower, or the wise man.¹⁰ Indeed, Thrasymachus does not simply teach rhetoric; he teaches an insight or knowledge (343b1–44c10; 74), and, as Socrates divines, he thinks that this insight constitutes “virtue and wisdom” itself (348e1–49a3). Thrasymachus thinks of his art as containing wisdom of some sort, and it is the wisdom itself that he values most. The difficulty, though, is that the core of his insight is the primacy of the private good and the superiority of injustice and tyranny in obtaining it. Thrasymachus’ insight is at odds with his pursuit of a life that teaches *others* to pursue tyranny rather than one that pursues tyranny itself. The difficulty in Thrasymachus’ reasoning, then, is the tension between the substance of his knowledge, on one hand, and the life that he chooses as a teacher, on the other. Thrasymachus is confused about whether the tyrant’s life or the knower’s life is best.

The problem seems to be that Thrasymachus does not have a clear grasp of the character of the wisdom he admires or the private advantage he seeks, and this confusion seems to lie in Thrasymachus’ understanding of knowledge or, as he calls it, art. Strauss says that “[w]hen developing Thrasymachus’ notion of ‘art strictly understood,’ Socrates speaks with Thrasymachus’ entire approval of the self-sufficiency of art, as contrasted with the lack of self-sufficiency of the things with which art is concerned” (86; *cf.* 342a–b). On this view, the arts

10 On the sophists’ view of knowledge, see Strauss 1953, 115–119.

are beneficial because they remedy our needs, as the doctor's art exists to cure the sick. At the start of his conversation with Thrasymachus, Socrates was able to characterize the knower as the "artisan in the precise sense" because knowledge, according to Thrasymachus, is akin to art in the sense of being something in itself perfect that accomplishes something else (*cf.* 112–13). Thrasymachus views knowledge as essentially practical, even supremely powerful. Strauss' description of Thrasymachus' view of art invites the thought that the power which Thrasymachus attributes to art, especially its capacity to respond to human neediness, leads him to hope that there may be an art that makes one wholly self-sufficient and thereby free of the need to look or attend to the good of others so that truly "justice is an unnecessary evil" (83). Thus, even as Thrasymachus admires the life of the knower, he may grasp that this life is not free from evils and hope that some life is. If Thrasymachus shares with Socrates the pursuit of a private good that consists in an intellectual rather than an active life, he, unlike Socrates, can find no satisfaction with knowledge that procures nothing else (*cf.* 125, 128). It is thus no surprise that Thrasymachus continues to admire tyranny even while he remains only a teacher of it.

Thrasymachus' attraction to the idea of complete self-sufficiency goes together with and may help explain his insufficient attention to his own vulnerability, particularly his need to avoid incurring the hostility of the city for what he teaches. In labeling Thrasymachus' initial definition of justice (the advantage of the stronger) as the thesis of the city, Strauss obscured the extent to which that thesis is in fact *offensive* to ordinary citizens. But Thrasymachus is not shy in saying such things; Glaucon has been "talked deaf" by Thrasymachus about this view (358c6–8). Moreover, Socrates easily leads Thrasymachus to advocate tyranny openly and vigorously (343b–44c; 84).

It is unclear to what extent Thrasymachus learns from Socrates that justice is necessary if we are not perfectly self-sufficient. But an awareness of Socrates' superior *understanding* is necessary for Thrasymachus to become Socrates' "willing listener and subordinate" (*id.*), i.e., for Socrates to tame him. Perhaps because Thrasymachus only "plays the city," and is drawn to a private good that transcends material goods, he is open to Socrates. Strauss uses Thrasymachus as both a representative of the political problem facing Socrates (when he "is" the city) and a potential ally (because he only "plays" the city). Socrates needs Thrasymachus as an ally precisely because of the hostility he arouses in "Thrasymachus" as the spokesman for the city. According to Strauss, Socrates needs the real Thrasymachus as an ally because "prudence is in need of forensic rhetoric" (76, 134). The subsequent references to Thrasymachus in his essay develop this theme.

4 A New Beginning

Strauss returns to Thrasymachus when he discusses Book v, which he calls a “new beginning” because its opening scene replicates that of Book i, as both scenes involve Socrates being compelled to undertake a task voted on by the rest. The two scenes, however, differ “decisively,” according to Strauss, and he attributes the difference to Thrasymachus, who is present at both “beginnings” but is not “a member of the city” until Book v (116; *cf.* 450a4–5). Strauss adds that the “foundation of the good city would seem to *require* that Thrasymachus become one of its citizens” (*id.*; emphasis added). He thus provokes us to wonder why a new beginning is needed to illuminate the good city, why Thrasymachus is needed for this purpose, and how Thrasymachus has become “one of its citizens.”

A new beginning is needed because justice, Strauss says, cannot be understood without understanding the relation between philosophy and the city (115). The reason is that justice still has two distinct meanings: “in one respect the warriors’ life is the just life *par excellence*, in another respect only the philosopher’s life is just” (*id.*). The former life appears just because it is characterized by the warriors’ complete dedication to the city (429b–c). Yet, an examination of the parallel account of justice in the soul shows that only the ruler is just (109; see also 122). As Strauss explains, only in the ruler is reason fully in control, enabling each part of the soul to do its proper work and pursue the good of the soul as a whole (107–09, 127; see 443d–44a). If, however, the justice of the ruler consists in the sound functioning of his soul, his justice seems to have little to do with involvement in the city. In fact, if justice is simply an internal arrangement, it is hard to see why the ruler would care for the city or would wish to serve it (110, 109). Strauss thus seems to suggest that an understanding of the just soul, which he calls the philosopher’s soul, and therefore an understanding of philosophy, is necessary to clarify the relation between philosophy and the city.¹¹

Strauss, however, indicates a more political reason for a new beginning when he discusses how Book v begins. Initially, it appears to turn away from the just city to a different theme: Socrates states that they have found the good city and good man (but *cf.* his conditional “if” at 449a2) and that they should now turn to examine their opposites. Polemarchus prevents this by asking Adeimantus whether they should force Socrates to explain his strange suggestion that, in

11 As Strauss points out, Socrates earlier indicated that the account of the soul they developed through Book iv, on which the whole definition of justice depends, is incomplete (109; see 435d1–5).

addition to being deprived of their own possessions, the guardians will also have to be deprived of their own families (446b–c; cf. 423e5–8). Adeimantus agrees that Socrates must address this and, as Polemarchus had done previously in Book I, playfully implements a resolution to compel Socrates to pursue the argument.

Strauss says that Polemarchus' intervention brings to the fore the question of the possibility of the city (122). The earlier interventions in Books II and IV by Glaucon and Adeimantus, Strauss says, raised only the question of the *desirability* of the city, but this present intervention provides "an indispensable corrective" (123). This corrective is needed because, by the end of Book IV, Socrates *seems* to have completed the task that Glaucon and Adeimantus had imposed on him, for he has shown that, understood as health of the soul, justice is desirable not only because of its consequences but "above all for its own sake" (115; cf. 105). Glaucon and Adeimantus, at least, seem satisfied with this account, but if they are, they should not be; the two meanings of justice—devotion to the city and health of the soul—Socrates has brought out are not obviously compatible. Of course, it is not clear that they—or even Polemarchus—are aware of the divergence of these two meanings. Still, Glaucon, in particular, may be disinclined to press the discussion any further because he *wants* Socrates' account thus far to hold, for it supports his hope that justice can be both individual happiness and dedication to the good of others (360e–62c). If so, this would mean that by the end of Book IV, Socrates' "restoration" or his attempt to "cure Glaucon" of his extreme political ambition has not yet been accomplished (see 63, 65); on the contrary, Socrates may have exacerbated Glaucon's ambition by inspiring a longing in him for the perfectly just city. For Glaucon's ambition to be cured, Glaucon must at a minimum consider the question of the possibility of the city, or, rather, the possibility of philosopher-kings (123), and the question of whether what he most deeply hopes for is possible.¹²

In curing Glaucon of extreme political ambition, Socrates does not wish to deprive him or Adeimantus of their hopes for justice; rather, he wishes to moderate those hopes (59, 137). He wants to preserve their attachment to the goodness of justice and the possibility of decent politics while at the same time making them aware of the impossibility of perfect justice, especially on the political level (137). Yet, to do this, he must press forward with the argument, and to this endeavor, Thrasymachus lends his support. Once Polemarchus reminds Adeimantus of Socrates' strange claim that guardians must be

12 Of course, Socrates' goal of curing Glaucon then depends on Polemarchus' intervention. Perhaps this explains why Strauss says that Polemarchus is "more important for the action of the *Republic* than one might desire" (123).

deprived of their families, Adeimantus quickly agrees that they must force Socrates to defend his claim. Glaucon joins in, though without much enthusiasm. At this point, Thrasymachus jumps in to say that Socrates should “take this as a resolution approved by all of us” (450a4–5), adding his authority to the mix. In contrast to the action of Book I, Thrasymachus intervenes to encourage Socrates rather than to attack him. Socrates demurs and warns that to proceed would be to stir up “a swarm of arguments” (450a10). But Thrasymachus resists Socrates’ protestations and seems to galvanize especially the less enthusiastic Glaucon to press Socrates to continue. In a small but apt display of rhetoric, Thrasymachus accuses Socrates of making them seem to be pursuing “fool’s gold” rather than arguments. Echoing Socrates’ earlier claim that the search for justice is akin to the search for gold (336e4–37a1), Thrasymachus implies that the “swarm of arguments” are precisely what is needed to procure the real gold that they seek and that to avoid the arguments would be shamefully foolish. Sure enough, Glaucon, with new enthusiasm, insists that Socrates proceed.¹³ Thrasymachus thus helps to facilitate the crucial discussion that follows. But what has happened since the end of Book I that makes Thrasymachus intervene to “compel” Socrates to develop his arguments? To put it differently, how has Socrates managed to persuade Thrasymachus to persuade?

The paragraph that immediately precedes Strauss’ account of the “new beginning” suggests at least one reason Thrasymachus may be interested in hearing Socrates’ argument about justice proceed. In the course of an obscure discussion of whether the communism of property that Socrates establishes for the guardians at the end of Book IV applies to all classes or only the upper class, Strauss concludes that it is limited to the upper class. Anticipating, however, the subsequent discussion of philosophy, he also brings out the fact that the philosopher observes a certain kind of communism or, rather, deprivation, simply and naturally by virtue of being a philosopher. According to Strauss, “the striving for one’s own is countered *only* by philosophy, by the quest for the truth, which as such cannot be anyone’s private possession” (115; see also 127).¹⁴ The paradox is that at the core of a life that is radically unconcerned with one’s own *things* lies a single-minded and wholehearted pursuit of a *private* activity that, while able to be done with others, is emphatically not an activity *devoted* to others (*id.*).

13 For Glaucon’s wish not to be foolish, see 360d1–7.

14 Strauss goes even further in suggesting that the whole purpose of communism in the *Republic* is to be a civic reflection of philosophy, the closest way in which the non-philosophic life can approach the life of philosophy (115, 122). Cf. Bruell 1994, 273–74.

Strauss refers to philosophy before it has become a theme in the *Republic* (which has not happened by the end of Book IV). But his statement underscores the need for some explanation of the wise ruler of Book IV, as Socrates has described him, whose justice consists in being utterly unconcerned with the ordinary goods that are the objects of injustice (442d4–443e); what does this ruler *do*? The account in Book IV of the wise man who “sets his own house in order and rules himself” (443d4) and does not pursue the goods of injustice must puzzle and intrigue Thrasymachus. This is especially so since Socrates has inverted Thrasymachus’ initial supposition that justice is an unnecessary evil; by the end of Book IV, Socrates seems to say that *injustice* is an unnecessary evil because the wise man is unconcerned with the “goods” it can bring.

Thrasymachus’ encounter with Socrates in Book I seems to have made him aware of the fact that he has something to learn from Socrates. Among the difficulties with his thinking is the tension between the insight on which he prides himself and the way of life he actually lives. His awareness of this tension would make him particularly attentive to Socrates’ account of the strange wise ruler, and eager to hear Socrates develop that case. This would explain why he interjects to move the conversation forward. It is in part thanks to Thrasymachus, then, that the investigation into justice becomes an investigation into philosophy, which will occupy Books V–VII, the “most important part of the book” according to Strauss (127). Strauss also notes, though, that whatever success Socrates may have with Glaucon, he “lacks the art of taming the many in deed . . . which is the art of Thrasymachus” (124). But to “convert” Thrasymachus to this role requires more. Socrates may have tamed Thrasymachus and even made him sufficiently interested in helping to establish the city in speech at the beginning of Book V,¹⁵ but it is not until Book VI that Socrates says he and Thrasymachus have become friends (498d). Strauss returns to Thrasymachus, and the question of whether the latter’s rhetoric could serve more far-ranging goals, when the question becomes whether philosophy and political power can ever coincide.

5 Rhetoric and Friendship

Strauss makes clear that the coincidence of philosophy and political power would be very rare and would require a radical change on the part of both the cities and philosophers (122–3). Cities would have to become willing to be ruled by philosophers and philosophers to become willing to rule in

15 Strauss calls him here “a member of the city” (116).

cities. Initially, though, Strauss, speaks as though it is not impossible to bring about the needed change at least on the part of the city; in this he follows Socrates (see 498d6–500e5). To do so, Strauss says, “the right kind of persuasion is necessary and sufficient” (123). The city will have to be persuaded that philosophers should rule. This is no mean task since from the city’s perspective philosophers are useless at best and dangerous at worst (487b–d). Still, Strauss indicates that the “right kind of persuasion is supplied by the art of persuasion, the art of Thrasymachus,” which, he adds, must be “directed by the philosopher and in the service of philosophy” (123). Strauss then says that it is “no wonder” that in this context Socrates declares that he and Thrasymachus have just become friends. Strauss traces their friendship to a proposal that Socrates makes to Adeimantus, namely, that in order to embrace philosophy without being destroyed, the city must forbid especially the philosophizing that is concerned with speeches to the young, which Strauss glosses as “the gravest kind of ‘corrupting the young’” (124). According to Strauss, Adeimantus thinks Thrasymachus will be “passionately opposed” to this proposal, but Socrates knows better and thinks that, “by making that proposal he has become the friend of Thrasymachus who is or plays the city” (123).

Why, according to Strauss, does Adeimantus think that Thrasymachus will oppose the proposal and why does Socrates think the opposite? To answer this, we must first grasp the way in which Strauss presents the scene in the *Republic*. Socrates traces the reason philosophy cannot now be accepted by the city to the fact that it is the young, the “lads fresh from childhood” (498a1), who approach its “hardest part,” namely, “that which has to do with speeches” (cf. 498a3–4 with 498b–c). It is Strauss who construes these speeches as “the gravest kind of ‘corrupting the young’” (124). Socrates then proposes restraining the practice of philosophy to avoid endangering the city. But no mention is made of “that which has to do with speeches,” and the philosophic life seems permitted only as a “spare-time occupation” for men whose strength is failing and who are “beyond political and military duties” (498b6–c1). Socrates’ proposal does away entirely with both Socrates’ and Thrasymachus’ ways of life, and this seems due to what Strauss describes as “corrupting” speeches. Adeimantus’ protest on behalf of Thrasymachus seems to confirm Strauss’ interpretation of the corrupting character of the banned speeches. Adeimantus does not explain what he thinks would be Thrasymachus’ opposition to the proposed ban on the practice of philosophy, but would it not be that his art involves or is reputed to involve engaging in corrupting speeches that, as we have seen, can encourage an admiration, if not outright pursuit, of tyranny? If so, the proposed ban would at a minimum inhibit Thrasymachus’ livelihood.

Strauss also draws our attention to Thrasymachus' speeches by adding that Socrates here becomes the friend of Thrasymachus, "who is or plays the city" (124). By using this phrase, Strauss reminds us that Thrasymachus, who "plays the city," whose "anger" is subordinate to his art (78), and who does not take the city's concerns seriously, risks incurring the city's anger as much as Socrates does. As Strauss says, Thrasymachus is just as capable of arousing the anger of the many as he is of appeasing it (124; see also 78, 80).¹⁶ By glossing the speeches that Socrates says need to be expunged as "corrupting" and reminding us of Thrasymachus' earlier speech, Strauss highlights a problem shared by Socrates and Thrasymachus. Both of them risk arousing the hostility of the city because both engage in speeches the city views as corrupting. Indeed, Socrates draws attention to this common problem when he notes, in describing the problematic speeches, that the speakers are "*fancied* to be complete philosophers" (498a, emphasis added). Socrates implies that the loudest and most offensive speeches do not come from philosophers, but he also indicates that those who loudly make such speeches are indistinguishable to the city from philosophers. Thrasymachus and his ilk thus endanger not only themselves; they also endanger philosophy (*cf.* 499d10–500a2). By indicating both the problems posed by their speeches and that such speeches would have to be eliminated from any city that could accept philosophy, Socrates signals to Thrasymachus that they share a problem; they are *both* dangerous to the city.¹⁷

If they share a common predicament, though, it is not clear that this suffices to create a friendship between Socrates and Thrasymachus. Nonetheless, Socrates claims that he and Thrasymachus become friends, and the reason for the claim may lie in the solution that Thrasymachus' art might provide to their common predicament. When Socrates proposes that corrupting speeches be expunged, he is discussing what would make philosophic rule acceptable or possible in a city. Socrates has, however, already indicated that he—indeed, the philosopher *per se*—does not wish to rule (see 346e9, 347d2–8, 443d–444a; *cf.* 82–83). Not only, then, will cities *not* undergo the radical transformation under discussion, but Socrates has no desire to promote it. Insofar as he and Thrasymachus are unwilling to abandon their ways of life, they will remain vulnerable to the city's hostility, from which they—and their kind—both need protection. Thrasymachus' art is thus especially important in an actual city that

16 See *Phaedrus*, 267c7–d2; Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1404a13.

17 On the importance of a *common* good to friendship, see Strauss' account of Socrates' exchange with Polemarchus and the importance of the definition of justice as helping friends (72–73, 82).

does not attempt to take philosophy in hand. The potential for Thrasymachus' rhetoric to be employed with a view to both his and Socrates' benefit provides the basis for a friendship between them.

Can, though, even properly guided rhetoric protect Socrates and Thrasymachus from the antagonism created by their speeches? Strauss now corrects his earlier praise of the power of persuasion (123; p. 23 above) and says that the many *cannot* be persuaded in a way that will "bring about the rule of philosophers" (which rule it is clear Socrates does not really want) (125).¹⁸ That rhetoric cannot meet this standard hardly renders it irrelevant, especially when used by one who has truly "listened to Socrates" (124). At least a certain kind of person in the city can be persuaded about quite extraordinary things. Strauss cites the philosophic view of political life, that even at its best "it is like life in a cave" (125), as an example of what would be impossible for non-philosophers to accept (*id.*). Yet, this is very close, if not identical, to what Socrates succeeds in getting Glaucon to accept in Book VII (516c4–17d2). Although what Glaucon accepts may fall short of a true acknowledgement of the "supremacy of philosophy and philosophers" (124), he is brought to think not that philosophers *should* rule but that they *should not* rule, that it would be unjust to make them do so since what they do is far superior to political rule (519d7–8). In bringing Glaucon to this view, Socrates also brings him closer to what he tells Adeimantus is the correct view (500b7–d2; cf. 120–21, 137).

Strauss thus indicates the considerable power of rhetoric, even as he describes its limitations (127). He mentions Socrates' final requirement to bring the good city into being (540d–541b), namely, that the philosophers expel from the city everyone over the age of ten, and points out the very great difficulty, if not impossibility, of this. Yet Strauss then adds that "this is not to deny that Socrates could have persuaded many fine young men and not a few old ones" not to leave the city themselves but "to believe" that others could be persuaded to leave the city for the sake of justice (126). Rhetoric, especially when invoked for the sake or in the service of justice has enormous power to persuade. If the many cannot—and perhaps should not—be persuaded of the "supremacy of philosophy," at least someone like Thrasymachus may be sufficiently persuaded, at a minimum, to avoid antagonizing the city with his speeches (cf. 500b1–5) and, at best, to persuade others of the decency of philosophers as the only ones who truly possess just souls (498d8–99a88, 500b8–502a2). In becoming Thrasymachus' friend, Socrates thus attempts to enlist Thrasymachus

18 This impossibility, however, is due as much if not more to philosophers' unwillingness to rule and thus to wish to persuade the non-philosophers to accept their rule (124–25; cf. 127).

in an effort to address a common problem with a view to preserving the lives they both seek. In the context of a proposal to make philosophy safe for the just city (by eliminating corrupting speeches to the young), Socrates indicates what is needed to make the city safe for philosophy.

6 Conclusion

Strauss makes a number of tantalizing suggestions about an alliance between Thrasymachus and Socrates, but this possibility remains unrealized. It seems that a "Thrasymachus" who remains simply a rhetorician is insufficient to accomplish the full task that Socrates requires, because although at the beginning of Book v he is "converted" into being a "member of the city" (116), he is not converted to philosophy.¹⁹ In his discussion of Book VIII, Strauss reminds the reader of Thrasymachus' limitations, contrasting Thrasymachus "who chooses injustice" with Socrates "who chooses justice" (129). With this statement, Strauss means to indicate that Thrasymachus has not been sufficiently persuaded by Socrates. Thrasymachus is not sufficiently attracted to the great good that makes the just man, i.e., the philosopher, happy (125, 27; cf. 619b–e). Without philosophy, Thrasymachus still holds a torch, so to speak, for tyranny as the greatest means to happiness.

If Socrates, according to Strauss, *chooses* justice (cf. 545a2–b2), this seems to mean that he chooses it as it has come to be understood—as the healthy soul of the philosopher, in whose soul alone justice and happiness coincide (127). But this understanding of justice does not exhaust Socrates' justice. Strauss closes the essay by reminding his readers that Book I of the *Republic* lets us see justice "by presenting Socrates' taming of Thrasymachus as an act of justice" (137). Strauss refers here to the most obvious or superficial reading of Socrates' exchange with Thrasymachus in Book I: it is just in the sense that Socrates staunchly opposes and defeats, at least in appearance, someone who openly praises injustice and tyranny.

Strauss offers a somewhat different picture of Socrates' justice through *his* presentation of Socrates' taming of Thrasymachus. Indeed, he makes their exchange and Thrasymachus' subsequent role a prominent part of his essay in order to draw attention to the *Republic's* teaching about the philosopher's duty to the city (128). According to Strauss' presentation, Socratic justice occurs in a context in which Socrates cannot ignore the needs of the city, especially since

19 Polemarchus seems to be the only interlocutor in the *Republic* to turn to philosophy (*Phaedrus* 257b3–4).

his own philosophic activity arouses its hostility. Strauss then helps the reader to begin to grasp Socrates' strategy in responding to the city's concerns.

His "political" activity involves taming men like Thrasymachus by showing them that they need to be more mindful of the city. To the extent that Thrasymachus becomes aware of the defect in his understanding to which Strauss draws our attention, he would also have a greater awareness of the limitations of art or knowledge in achieving complete self-sufficiency. He would thereby understand, as Strauss indicates, that justice may be "not noble but necessary" (128; cf. 83). Having become aware of the danger that his openness poses to himself *and* philosophers,²⁰ who in the eyes of the many closely resemble sophists and rhetoricians, he would be at the very least more cautious and prudent in his speech. In addition, however, to taming men like Thrasymachus, Socrates also requires the support of a "Thrasymachus" to have a broader effect on the city than he is able to have on only those present for the conversation. Because Thrasymachus is not converted to philosophy, he cannot fulfill rhetoric's most important role in supporting philosophy. It is only through a Platonic dialogue that this rhetoric has this effect; indeed, Plato may be the rhetorician the need for which is indicated in the *Republic* (see 137; cf. 51, 54).²¹

Strauss' presentation shows that Socrates' justice does not simply serve his fellow citizens but promotes a genuinely common good, or, rather, that, in the *Republic*, Socrates acts in a way that advances both his own and others' goods (76–77, 127–28). To the extent that Socrates has made Thrasymachus less outspoken and inclined to further rather than hinder his arguments, Socrates benefits himself, Thrasymachus, and the city. Strauss, however, stresses that this aspect of Socratic justice differs from that which is defended as the health of the soul. Socrates does concern himself to some degree with the good of the city (see 127–8). To be sure, Socrates' way of life, the philosophic life, is on the whole freer than Thrasymachus' from such demands. But Socrates, unlike Thrasymachus, is aware of these demands and the need to meet them.

20 In the midst of a discussion of Adeimantus' antipathy to democracy, the regime in which Socrates claims that everyone can supposedly live as he pleases, Strauss offers examples of the kind of danger to which certain conversations are exposed even in democracies. According to Strauss, Socrates exaggerates the mildness of democracy, noting that the discussion abstracts from such things as Socrates' execution for injustice and impiety, and the "bloody persecution of guilty and innocent alike" that followed the mutilation of the *Hermæ* (132–33).

21 For helpful reflections on why Socrates himself could not or would not undertake this kind of rhetoric in the course of his life, see Leibowitz 2010, 154–60. Strauss prompts this same question on 124.

According to Strauss, one must distinguish between Socrates' voluntary conversations and his compulsory ones (63–4, 128), the conversation in the *Republic* being an example of the latter. We thus see in the *Republic* an example of Socrates undertaking a duty (cf. 63–64, 118, 128, 137). His assumption of this duty and the way he fulfills it, by making use of the conversation with Thrasymachus, permit him to demonstrate, through both his argument and his actions, the character of the philosopher's justice (cf. 59). This is the reason that Strauss goes out of his way to focus on Thrasymachus and to bring out the common ground between them. We are brought to see by this extraordinary exchange and what follows from it that despite Socrates' fundamental concession to Thrasymachus, there is, properly understood, a justice that can—and must—be expounded as a crucial part of the political defense of philosophy.

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Philosophy and Law: On the Gravest Question in Plato's *Minos*

Robert Goldberg

Strauss published articles, essays, or books (or substantial portions of them) treating at length only ten of Plato's 35 dialogues. All the more striking, then, is the fact that he devoted an entire essay just to the *Minos* or *On Law*—one of Plato's shortest, strangest, and most easily overlooked dialogues.¹ A justification for his having done so appears in his interpretation's introductory paragraph, where he emphasizes the gravity of the question that the *Minos* raises and answers—What is law? The question is not only grave; it is also, apparently, sensitive. For Strauss emphasizes in addition the merely preliminary character of the dialogue and the reluctance of both Plato and Xenophon to depict Socrates raising the question it treats. While Plato has Socrates do so only in a preliminary and therefore apparently minor dialogue, Xenophon avoids having Socrates do so at all. Instead, he has the young man Strauss calls “Socrates’ ambiguous companion Alcibiades” raise the question of law in a conversation with Pericles when Socrates is absent (#1).² As for the dialogue’s preliminary character, it appears to be merely the introduction to Plato’s *Laws* (his longest and perhaps most substantive dialogue). “The *Laws* begins where the *Minos* ends,” Strauss notes, and is especially in need of an introduction since it is “the only Platonic dialogue in which Socrates is not mentioned or which is set far away from Athens, in Crete.”³ The *Minos* ends with a praise of the laws given to Crete by Minos—the son and pupil of Zeus; the *Laws* begins with an examination of those laws, which are said to be of divine origin. Does Strauss thus

1 So that readers can use either the Strauss (1968) or the Pangle (1987) edition of “On Plato’s *Minos*,” I have numbered the paragraphs and cited Strauss accordingly. Except where noted, italics and bracketed words, including those in quotations, are mine. All Plato citations refer to the Stephanus page and line numbers in the Oxford Classical Texts edition, *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet. Translations from the Greek are my own.

2 See Strauss (1972), 15, and *Memorabilia* 1.2.39–47.

3 It thus appears that Strauss might have regarded the *Epinomis*, which continues the *Laws*, as spurious; if so, then he attributed to Plato 34 dialogues at most.

mean to suggest that the question of the *Minos* is preliminary to the question of the *Laws*?

The question of law is not merely one grave question among many but, as Strauss asserts without explanation, “perhaps the gravest of all questions” (#1). It is raised here as a universal question, a fact underscored by the bluntness with which Socrates asks it to open the conversation, as well as by his companion’s remaining “nameless and faceless.” Strauss contrasts this aspect of the *Minos* with the *Crito*, where the particular question of Socrates’ own law-abidingness “distracts our attention from the universal question in all its gravity” (#1). It is not until the second paragraph, however, that Strauss begins to shed light on what he takes to be the gravity of the question. As he there observes, the question Socrates opens the dialogue with “cannot be said to be unambiguous.” The opening question occurs not in the universal form used by Strauss so far but in a slightly qualified form: “What is law *for us*?” According to Strauss, the qualification “for us” could mean either “in our opinion” (and thus make the question “universal or theoretical”) or “to which we (we Athenians[?]) are subject” (and thus make the question “practical or particular”).⁴ While distinct, Strauss notes, the theoretical and the practical questions are inseparable. Indeed, the second paragraph leads up to the statement that, according to the end of the dialogue, “the law deserving of the highest respect is the law, not of Athens, but of Crete.” In finding out what law is, then, one may come to the realization that the law of one’s own country is inferior to the law of another country, perhaps even a country that is the enemy of one’s own. If nothing else, the knowledge that this were so could weaken the attachment one felt to one’s own country or laws. Indeed, when Strauss later comments on a passage in which Socrates is defending Minos, Crete’s legislator, against the way in which the Athenian tragic poets depict him, he observes that Socrates sets out to “liberate” his interlocutor “from the spell of an Athenian myth as he has liberated him from the spell of the Athenian laws” (#16).

As troubling as this may be, it is not enough to show why the question of law should be a candidate for the gravest of *all* questions. After all, if another country’s law is deserving of more respect than one’s own, one’s own might still be deserving of *some* respect. And a worse law might be changed for the better. Moreover, there appear to be much graver questions for us as human beings than any question about law—for instance, what happens to us when we die and whether there is a God who cares for us. So the problems with law must go deeper than Strauss has so far indicated for the question of law to be as grave

4 Brackets are Strauss’.

as he suggests. The third paragraph leads up to a suggestion somewhat more troubling. Having referred to Socrates' explication of his opening question, in which he first uses gold and then stone as an analogy for law, and having noted that gold is "most valuable" while a stone may be "entirely worthless," Strauss asks whether "a bad law is as much law as a good law" (#3). If the answer should turn out to be no, we might conclude that we are free to ignore that so-called law. Moreover, having pointed out that law, like stone and unlike gold, can be used in the plural, Strauss makes it seem as though law is more likely to prove entirely worthless than to prove most valuable. And so when in the next paragraph (#4) he shows us that law, according to Socrates' suggestion at least, is "so far from being something inanimate (like gold or stone) that it is an act of the soul," we may well be relieved. Indeed, in distilling a quite complex passage Strauss makes more forceful Socrates' suggestion that law might be either science (which he characterizes as manifestation) or art (which he characterizes as finding or invention)—i.e., two very respectable acts of the soul (cf. #4 with *Minos* 313c7–314b6).

Socrates' suggestion, in the form of a question, came in response to his companion's first definition of law, which Strauss states as follows: law is "the whole consisting of whatever is 'held' or whatever is established by law" (#4).⁵ Having heard but not understood Socrates' suggestion, the companion replied with what Strauss calls "the second and *central* answer to Socrates' comprehensive question" (ibid.; cf. *Laws* 644d1–3): law is the decision of the city.⁶ By noting that this is the central definition, Strauss calls attention to its importance, without however explaining it. Because this definition "does not meet the issue," Socrates rephrases it so that it names the act of soul responsible for decision—namely, opinion.⁷ The act of soul that is law, Strauss infers, is neither science nor art. Now, in giving his second definition, the companion had said that law *risks* (κινδυνεύει) being nothing other than the decision of the city (*Minos* 314b11–c1), or as Socrates reformulates it, in Strauss' paraphrase, law "is the city's opining about the affairs of the city" (#4). As Strauss observes, following Socrates, "a city's opinions may be low." But because of *our* assumption (as Strauss speaks of it, quietly identifying us—his readers, as well as

5 The word Strauss translates by "hold" (ὑμίζω), used purposefully throughout the *Minos*, comes from the word for law (νόμος). It is the same word for (not) "believing in" the gods in the impiety portion of the charge on which Athens executed Socrates.

6 "Decision" translates δόγμα (*dogma*) which may also mean conviction or resolution (as in a resolution of Congress) and is the result of opining or of opinion—δόξα.

7 Socrates secures the companion's agreement to a reformulation of his definition: law is "political opinion."

himself?—with the companion) that there is such a close “connection between law and justice” that “in a way [they] seem interchangeable,” law will be “something high” (#5). By choosing the opinion that law is high, Socrates “tacitly rejects the opinion that law is the opinion of the city” (ibid.). He does so, Strauss notes, “without any hesitation and without giving any reason.” Strauss thus tempts his readers to think that Socrates himself views law as something high. But perhaps this view of law was already implied in the *fear* the companion expressed that law may be nothing more than the decision of the city. And it was not Socrates, who after all was only asking questions, but the companion who went on to affirm both the highness of justice and its connection with law. It may have been no more than this that prompted Socrates to opt for the view that law is something high, with no indication that he himself subscribes to it (cf. *Minos* 314c6–d8). Strauss calls these two opinions—that the law is the opinion of the city and that the law is something high—“two most audible opinions,” which are so audible because they are the opinions of the city. The contradiction between them prevents “even the best of citizens,” with whom Strauss seems to associate Socrates, from simply bowing to them (#5).

At this point in the conversation Socrates affirms that law is indeed an opinion, according to Strauss, but “does not yet say whose opinion it is” (#5). If law must be something high, we might add, then the decisions of cities we call “laws” are not as such entitled to the name. By choosing the opinion that law is something high, and doing so with our own consent as well as that of the companion, Socrates has transcended the laws of the city—i.e., of any and every city, of the city as such; there is a standard that transcends the city and its “laws” and that they must live up to. The question of law is becoming graver. Still, Strauss together with Socrates has only been following out what perhaps everyone has felt at one time or another—that the law of any city or country looks up to a higher law. We all believe, for instance, in the possibility of unjust laws; in calling a law unjust, we always *implicitly* invoke a higher law and often *explicitly* (as both Antigone and Martin Luther King did). So while the situation with respect to law is becoming graver, it is not yet grave enough to warrant Strauss’ description. In case we are tempted to think that what the law of the city looks up to is natural law, however, it is worth noting that no such phrase occurs in the *Minos*.⁸ Strauss might have something like natural law in mind when he observes that the companion’s *first* definition “would have been compatible with the view that law is custom of which no one knows whence it came or, as one might say, which is not ‘made’ but has ‘grown’” (#4). But regardless, that definition was rejected by Socrates in

8 In fact, no form of the word for nature appears in the *Minos* at all.

favor of one that defined law as some act of the soul, like science or art or, as Socrates himself seems to think, opinion. Perhaps, then, Socrates knew prior to questioning his companion that so-called natural law, like any other kind of law, would also have to be an act of the soul. If so, he may have needed the companion only to confirm his suspicion as to *which* act of the soul it was, as well as *whose* soul it was an act of.

By following out the implications of his companion's concessions, Socrates arrives at the third and final definition of law, the defense of which will take up most of the dialogue. According to Strauss, Socrates "says that [law] is a high opinion, hence a true opinion, and hence the finding out of what is" (#5).⁹ This makes law out to be something very high indeed: it sounds as though law may be science after all. But as Strauss indicates in his next paragraph (#6), Socrates does not quite arrive at the stated conclusion. In fact, by saying that Socrates says that law is the finding out of what is, Strauss replicates and calls attention to the mistake made by the companion, who appears to think that this is what he heard Socrates say. And it would in fact follow from the assumptions Socrates has laid out—i.e., from the companion's own assumptions (*Minos* 314e1–315a2); hence it may reveal that this is what the companion longs for law to be. In taking the final step, however, Socrates takes what Strauss calls "a step back"; for he says not that law *is* the finding out of what is, but that it *wishes* to be (*Minos* 315a2–3; #6). From this qualification it could seem that in Socrates' view law falls short of science once again and is demoted to the rank of mere opinion. But Strauss presents the "step back" taken by Socrates as rescuing law or laws in the ordinary sense of the word. For if law *were* the finding out of what is, and *what is* never changes while the laws we know change from one time or place to another, then "all or most of the things which we call laws . . . would not be laws at all" (#6). The situation is different, and perhaps better, if law "only wishes, or tends, to be the finding out of what is" or if, as Strauss also puts it, law "is not *necessarily*" the finding out of what is (*ibid.*). For in that case the things we ordinarily call laws could vary as we see them do while deriving "their legitimation from their end: The Truth" (*ibid.*). Strauss thus seems to imply that most or all so-called laws could thereby possess a degree of dignity that made them worthy of respect and obedience. Perhaps all laws even partake of the truth in some measure. As for the "finding out" that law wishes to be, Strauss suggests that it falls "between 'finding' or art on the one hand and 'manifestation' or science on the other" (#5; cf. *Minos* 315a1–3 with 314b1–5); he does not explain what sort of thing that would make it.

9 The Greek term Strauss translates as "what is"—τὸ ὄν—also means "being."

Strauss uses what happens next in the dialogue to initiate a new thread in his interpretation. According to Strauss the companion “fails to grasp” the qualification and believes Socrates “left it at suggesting” that law *is* the finding out of what is. In protesting this definition, the companion asks in disbelief, “How come, Socrates, if law is the finding out of what is, we don’t always use the same laws in regard to the same things—if the things that are have indeed been found out by us?” (*Minos* 315a4–6) This provides an opening for Socrates. Using the distinction introduced by the companion, Socrates traces the changeability or variety we find in laws to what Strauss calls “the defects of human beings” rather than to law itself. Strauss remarks that the “implied distinction between the infallible law and the fallible human beings suggests to us that law is indeed an act of soul, but perhaps not necessarily of the human soul” (#6). In this way Strauss, perhaps following Socrates himself, introduces the theme or question of *divine* law into the consideration of what law is; the gravity of the question “What is law?” may have something to do, then, with its implications for divine law. In any case, if this *was* an oblique reference to divine law on Socrates’ part, it may help to explain why the companion, whom “one might call free from prejudices” (#19),¹⁰ is so bothered by the unqualified (and unstated) third definition of law that he fails to take note of Socrates’ qualification even when he repeats it. It may also help to explain the companion’s reaction when Socrates asks whether the distinction between law and human beings that we just saw paraphrased by Strauss enables them to settle the question of whether laws vary or rather all peoples always use the same laws. In his lengthy reply the companion, Strauss explains, “proves the variety of laws by the examples of laws concerning sacrifices and burials,” examples that “concern sacred things” and thus “confirm to some extent Socrates’ definition of law”: “they show that at any rate the most awe-inspiring laws are based on more or less successful attempts to find out what is in the highest sense, namely, the gods and soul and hence what the gods demand of men and what death means” (#7). If the companion chose his examples for precisely this reason, then it appears he means to disprove the suggestion that law *is* the finding out of what is by showing that we have no evidence of divine law—i.e., of an infallible law that is the act of a divine soul. Laws that might be thought divine—laws, for example, that declare what the gods demand of us—themselves contradict one another over time and from place to place.

Moreover, the examples the companion uses—such as human sacrifices legal in various times and places—“seem to show” that in the beginning, in the age of Kronos, men were savage, “whereas in present-day Athens they

10 For the meaning of this phrase, consider Strauss (1965), 130–131.

are gentle; hence Athenian laws will be superior to the oldest laws, Greek or barbarian" (#7). The fact that this "finding," as Strauss calls it, presupposes that laws do change from one place or time to another may be what leads Socrates—who according to Strauss is not satisfied with the finding—to treat "the changeability of law in so gingerly a manner" (ibid.). Strauss, who along with Plato may have in mind the philosopher's ultimate fate, thus suggests that Socrates finds present-day Athenians not so gentle as his companion believes them to be. In whatever ways the Athenians and their laws may have changed over time, at least something of their savagery may have remained. Toward the end of the essay, Strauss will cast doubt on the view that savagery is compatible with justice (cf. #7 with #19).

Strauss devotes two paragraphs to Socrates' next move in the conversation, where Socrates "attempts to bring about a meeting of minds with the companion by means of . . . short questions and answers" (#8). That attempt consists in securing the companion's agreement to a series of statements that Strauss summarizes as follows: "people everywhere and always hold that the just things are just, the noble things are noble, the unjust things are unjust, and the base things are base—just as all people, regardless of whether they hold it lawful or impious to bring human sacrifices, hold that the things that weigh more are heavier and the things that weigh less are lighter" (ibid.; cf. *Minos* 315e–316b). As Strauss implies, by slipping in the example or analogy of the heavier and the lighter Socrates indicates his own view according to which all things *just* might also be *unjust* (#9).¹¹ Strauss leaves it at raising two questions that reflect the doubt Socrates plants: "(1) Can justice be a matter of degree as is weight? (2) Is disagreement regarding weight as widespread and profound as disagreement regarding justice?" (ibid.) We might flesh this out in the following way. Just as something heavy from one point of view is light from another, so something just from one point of view is unjust from another. For instance, from one point of view it may be just to harm a criminal—e.g., to prevent him from harming others by locking him up or putting him to death; from another, it may be unjust—he deserves, if anything, not to be harmed but to be pitied and educated or genuinely corrected.¹² In other words, it appears that the act of the human soul called law (which we might call the moral sense) apprehends—or so it believes—that right and wrong exist and exist in such a way that the right is right and in no way wrong and the wrong is wrong and in no way right, even though it might be hard or impossible to ascertain what the

11 See especially *Republic* 538d6–e4 and *Theaetetus* 175b9–c3.

12 See, e.g., *Republic* 335a6–d13, *Gorgias* 468e6–481c4, *Apology* 25c5–26a7, and *Laws* 731c–d, 860c–e.

content of right and of wrong would be. By inserting the analogy to the lighter and the heavier, Socrates has given what we might call a slight indication of his own disagreement with what is “universally held” concerning right and wrong, or the just and the unjust. As to the profundity of the disagreement over the just things and the noble things, Strauss illustrates it by referring back to the companion’s own example: all people share the universal opinion with respect to those things, “regardless of whether they hold it lawful or impious to bring human sacrifices” (#8). Strauss characterizes Socrates’ abstraction from the fact that what is “universally held” has nothing to do with the *content* of the just things and the noble things as a “sophism” that Socrates himself draws our attention to.

Because Socrates concludes this series of exchanges as though he has demonstrated that law is the finding out of what is, Strauss suggests we call it “the second proof” of Socrates’ definition of law (cf. #9 with *Minos* 316b2–5).¹³ Now, Strauss might mean that what Socrates really has shown is the ground for his “definition” as he actually gave it—that law (merely) *wishes* to be the finding out of what is. Does all law embody the “universally held” opinion according to which, for instance, the just things are just and not unjust? Are the just things (and the unjust) and the noble things (and the base) themselves what law wishes to be the finding out of as (among) things that are? If so, and if Socrates has sound reasons for not sharing the “universal” opinion, then the question of law would be very grave indeed.

Looking ahead in the *Minos*, Strauss decides that “the second proof” is in fact the first part of Socrates’ “tripartite defense of his definition of law,” which forms “the second or central part” of the dialogue (#10).¹⁴ In this paragraph and the next Strauss treats “the central section of the central part.” Here Socrates, apparently assuming that law is an art rather than a science, “abruptly turns to the writings of men who possess an art.” Summarizing Socrates’ argument, Strauss observes that laws would then be “prescriptive writings composed by experts of a certain kind, namely the kings (or statesmen)” (#11).¹⁵

13 The first proof would then be what led him to that definition in the first place (*Minos* 314c4–315a3).

14 Strauss indicates that the dialogue has three main parts, with the middle part in turn divided in three, as follows. Part I, 313a–315e (definitions of law). Part II, 315e–318d (Socrates’ defense of his definition): 11a. 315e–316c (the just things and the noble things); 11b. 316c–317d (law is an art); 11c. 317d–318b (law, like other arts, distributes the parts of one whole to the parts of another). Part III, 318b–321d (the laws of *Minos*).

15 The word Strauss translates “experts” (ἐπιστήμονες), from the word for science, could also be translated “knowers.” Strauss reserves “knowers” for εἰδότες, which is related to the word for Plato’s forms (εἶδη) and literally means “those who have seen.”

The companion “emphatically agrees that regarding things of which men possess knowledge all knowers agree.” This implies that the frequent change of laws at Athens is “a clear proof that the Athenian legislature is ignorant,” a suspicion, we might add, that the companion appears to have had from the start. He assents to this argument not because he understands and can genuinely agree with it but, Strauss explains, because “Socrates has succeeded in appealing from his pro-Athenian prejudice to his anti-democratic prejudice.” From a consideration of this paragraph’s argument, then, at least one grave implication of the question of law has emerged. As Strauss observes, the answer here given to the theoretical question “What is law?” supplies “at least a negative answer to the practical question ‘What is the law to which we are subject?’” The negative answer would be this: We (Athenians) are not subject to the laws of Athens because the “findings or decisions” of the Athenian legislature “do not deserve to be called laws or to be respected as laws; in fact those ‘laws’ must be particularly bad.” Might there yet be some law to which the Athenians or at least some *other* people are subject?

A further problem with law emerges in the next paragraph (#12). Here Strauss observes that in “the last section of the central part Socrates proves that law is an art by assuming that art consists in distributing properly the parts of some whole to the parts of another whole—of a herd as it were.” Borrowing from a later part of Socrates’ argument Strauss goes on to say, “What human beings call laws would then be . . . in the best case the distributing of the proper food and toil to the souls of human beings by the king” (#12; cf. *Minos* 317e–318a with 321c4–d3). After noting, a few sentences later, that in this section Socrates no longer mentions writings, Strauss explains that “assigning to each soul what is good for it cannot be done well except orally, by the king on the spot.” He adds that it would be simpler to say “that such assigning cannot be done well by *any* law” but “Socrates *prefers* to say that it is *best* done by the *best* laws, the laws of the king.” It is perhaps in giving the upshot of this whole line of reasoning that Strauss reveals how grave the question of law might be. Whereas Socrates’ previous argument, according to which law, like the expression of other arts, consists in prescriptive writings, implied only “that *at least almost all* so-called laws do not deserve to be called laws,” his present argument implies “that law must be as variable as the individuals and their individual situations and hence that *no* so-called law deserves to be called law” (#12). In his next remark, Strauss does little to reassure us: “On the other hand, by now speaking of the *best* laws Socrates restores the common view according to which certain decisions of ignoramuses or of assemblies of ignoramuses may also be regarded and respected as law” (*ibid.*). Strauss does not specify which decisions may be so regarded; perhaps he means that, by chance, even

ignoramus might sometimes distribute the proper food and toil to the soul of someone. The best laws, Strauss notes, are not “unwritten laws of unknown origin which say the same things always and everywhere, but certain acts of a wise soul” (#12). Indeed, as Strauss observes in the brief paragraph (#13) that concludes his treatment of the dialogue’s second and central part, Socrates had opened that part with “the suggestion that there is universal agreement regarding the just and the noble things,” a suggestion that could be thought to refer to unwritten laws that are the same always and everywhere and therefore “cannot be the work of human legislators.” His reference to *Memorabilia* 4.4.19 suggests that Strauss has in mind divine legislators rather than natural law.¹⁶ But the *Minos*, he observes, is “silent about the unwritten laws thus understood.” Instead, the unwritten laws Socrates has in mind are of known origin—namely, “the distributing by the king of the proper food and toil to each man’s soul.”

The (ambiguous) gravity of the question of law does not fully emerge until Strauss considers the third and final part of the dialogue. There Socrates introduces the laws of Minos, said to come from his father Zeus, which might therefore be thought to satisfy all the requirements of law. Strauss has shown us how remarks of Socrates point in the direction of, or to the need for, god-given laws, while suggesting that Socrates has thus been preparing the companion for their reception. Before coming to the last part of the *Minos*, as Strauss explains, we are supposed to have learned what law is and what makes a law good; moreover, what we have learned “may have made us doubtful whether the best laws can be of human origin” (#14). But the laws Minos gave to Crete, while not of human origin, are not of the sort that Socrates has led us, and perhaps the companion as well, to expect. Indeed, what “must surprise us is that the laws of Zeus do *not* consist of assigning to each man’s soul the food and toil best fitted for him, and besides that Zeus did not communicate his laws directly to all men . . .” Instead, those laws treat human beings not as individuals but like members of a herd. How then do the laws even of Zeus—“the highest god,” Strauss reminds us—escape the critique that Socrates has tacitly been subjecting law to all along? What makes divine laws the *best* laws, or even laws at all, if they fail to redress those shortcomings of so-called law that have come to light so far? And how, we might also ask, are those laws, or for that matter any laws we can think of, known to be divine in the first place? Strauss does not raise such questions explicitly but addresses them nonetheless.

With such questions in mind, we are better prepared to understand Strauss’ treatment of the last part of the *Minos*. In spelling out what “must surprise

16 For his nuanced treatment of *Memorabilia* 4.4.19, however, cf. Strauss (1972), 111–113.

us” Strauss notes that Zeus communicated his laws only to Minos, “whom he appointed also as the highest judge of the dead (*Gorgias* 523e–524a).” Strauss thus joins something Socrates says in the *Gorgias* to what he says in the *Minos* when he reminds the companion that according to Homer’s *Odyssey* Minos—far from being the “savage, harsh, and unjust” king that the companion, following the Athenian tragic poets, presumes him to be (*Minos* 318d)—“metes out justice in Hades while holding the golden scepter” of Zeus (319d). It is near the end of the *Gorgias* that Socrates, in the course of giving Callicles a myth or account (*Gorgias* 522e–523a; 527a, e), claims that Minos is the highest judge of the dead (524a; cf. 526c–d). Strauss goes on to suggest that Zeus gave his laws only to Minos because he “did not wish to rule directly so that man . . . would be compelled or enabled to choose as long as he lives” (#14). In these ways, Strauss quietly connects the notions of free will and justice with the notion of reward and punishment in an afterlife and at the same time reminds us of the problems with these notions that the *Gorgias* treats at some length and that the myth or account Socrates gives Callicles at the end, carefully read, does nothing to dispel.¹⁷ The companion, however, shows no awareness of such problems (by raising objections, for instance), and Socrates says little that might awaken him to them. Rather, as Strauss appears to suggest by his speculations on Zeus’s motives, Socrates is content to leave untouched or even raise whatever hopes his companion may harbor with regard to an afterlife. Strauss leads us to wonder whether what the laws of Zeus fail to assign to each man’s soul is more than made up for, in the companion’s mind at least, by the thought of an afterlife with all the promise it holds.

To the speculation already mentioned, Strauss adds that if Zeus had communicated his law to men directly, then they would necessarily be able to know his thoughts; instead, Zeus gave laws through an “intermediary”—his son Minos who, Strauss notes, participates in both divinity and humanity (#14). It thus appears that according to Strauss Zeus wanted his thoughts kept from men, perhaps because they are beyond human comprehension or in order to remain mysterious. Indeed, the mysterious power of the divine and the hopes we have of it become the explicit theme of the next paragraph (#15). As Strauss reminds us, Socrates leads up to the laws of Zeus by speaking first “of laws (prescriptive and distributive acts) both good and ancient regarding flute playing” (see *Minos* 318b–c). Of Socrates’ strange way of proceeding, Strauss says that the “example of flute playing—of an art which reminds most forcibly of speech and yet which cannot be practiced while one speaks—draws our

17 According to *Gorgias* 476d8–477b1, e.g., only what improves the soul qualifies as just punishment.

attention to the quality of the divine as distinguished from the ancient and the good.” A few sentences later he asks whether the stability of the best laws might be “due to the unspeakable or mysterious power of the divine which rules chance and may rule it in favor of the good.” As he did in the previous paragraph, Strauss points to hopes that we and the companion might have with regard to the divine. As for “the good” in whose favor the divine may rule chance, Strauss perhaps has in mind those who obey the laws that Zeus is said to have given to Crete, laws that Socrates himself has likened to flute music, with its bewitching power over human beings.¹⁸ Strauss and Socrates lead us to wonder whether the divinity of the laws of Crete, like that of the flute songs of Marsyas and Olympos to which Socrates likens them, consists not in the fact (hard or impossible to ascertain) that they come from a god but rather in the fact that, as Socrates says, they “move and bring to light those who are in need of the gods” (#15; cf. *Minos* 318b6–7 and 320b4–7).¹⁹ In other words, the laws of Crete, said to be divine, reveal not the gods but those human beings who need them.

Strauss spends the next paragraph (#16) laying out some of the very implausible things one would have to accept in order to be persuaded that the laws of Crete have in truth come from Zeus and that they would therefore be wise or good for those who live under them. But if they are so implausible, why does the companion accept them or, at any rate, allow those objections he does raise to be so easily laid to rest? This is the context in which Strauss observes that Socrates “sets out to liberate” the companion “from the spell of an Athenian myth as he has liberated him from the spell of Athenian laws”—the myth being the tale the Athenian tragic poets tell of the injustice of Minos, which consists according to them in demanding from Athens that infamous ransom—“a kind of human sacrifice” (#17). We recall that Strauss accounted for the companion’s earlier liberation in terms of Socrates’ success in appealing from his pro-Athenian prejudice to his anti-democratic prejudice (#11). Whether Strauss has in mind the same two prejudices, if indeed he means that this liberation takes place in the same way, is unclear. Surely the prejudice Socrates would be appealing *from* could be called pro-Athenian: Minos was the enemy of Athens. But could the prejudice he would be appealing *to* be called anti-democratic? Perhaps it could, since Socrates is praising the laws of a king or a god, one

18 Socrates uses a word for song (νόμος) that is the same as the word for law. See also *Republic* 531d7–e1 and *Laws* 722d2–e1, 775b1–4, 799e10–800a4.

19 Cf. Alcibiades’ description of Socrates at *Symposium* 215b2–216a2.

presumed to be wise or to possess an art, and not the laws of an ignorant demos.²⁰ But in light of the two paragraphs leading up to this one, the prejudices Strauss might have in mind could be instead, on the one hand, the belief, encouraged by the tragic poets, that Athens has been altogether wronged by Minos and, on the other, the belief, encouraged by Socrates (who in praising Minos invokes the authority of Homer and Hesiod), that there are gods who may care for “the good.” Such beliefs, and the hopes they inspire, could blind the companion to those weaknesses in Socrates’ argument that Strauss is calling our attention to. Indeed, in the next paragraph (#17) Strauss, partly paraphrasing Socrates, speaks of the Athenian tragic poets as taking revenge on Minos, a revenge that “is effective because tragedy is in its way as pleasing to the people and as apt to lead the soul as flute playing itself” (cf. *Minos* 321a). By directly connecting tragedy with flute playing, which Socrates does not do, Strauss suggests that one’s need of justice and one’s need of the gods have a common ground in the soul. Moreover, he makes the claim, which Socrates himself does not make, that Minos had “waged a *just* war against Athens”—perhaps telling the story from the point of view of Minos (a son of Zeus) and thus reminding us of an essential difference between Socrates and the companion noted earlier: the companion holds that justice is something high and that the just things are just and not unjust—two opinions that Socrates makes use of in the *Minos*, without however embracing them as his own. Those opinions, we recall, were used to prove that law *is* the finding out of what is.

Although Strauss has shown in paragraph 16 that in order to vindicate the goodness of Minos and of his or his father’s laws Socrates must not only accept books of Homer and Hesiod as authoritative texts but also provide them with a tendentious interpretation, these facts do not appear to constitute sufficient grounds for rejecting the claim that those laws come from Zeus or that they are good for men. He puts off stating the deeper problem until the last sentence of the paragraph, where he notes that, as Socrates himself makes clear at the very end of the dialogue, “the whole conversation is based on ignorance of the function of the good legislator. . . .” In the first sentence of paragraph 18, Strauss will return to the end of the dialogue. In the intervening paragraph, he shows how Socrates indicates a doubt as to the value or goodness of piety just as he indicates a doubt as to the goodness of Minos: “The audible proof of Minos’ goodness,” Strauss explains, “is balanced by an inaudible doubt of that goodness. The difference between proof and doubt corresponds to the difference between two Socratic exhortations” (#17). He elaborates as follows.

20 As Strauss notes, Socrates attributes the noble art of sophistry to Zeus and Minos (cf. #16 with 319c).

Socrates, shortly after exhorting the companion to piety—i.e., not to speak ill of Minos, “a hero who was the son of Zeus”—exhorts him “to be on his guard against incurring the hatred of any patriotic poet.” According to Strauss, then, the second exhortation is the inaudible doubt of the goodness of the first, the exhortation to piety.²¹ These two exhortations, Strauss notes, cannot be complied with in all cases, as the example of Minos shows, even though each one demands such compliance. It was the exhortation to piety that Socrates complied with by praising “most highly the most ancient enemy of Athens to whom he will owe, if indirectly, the postponement of his execution decreed by the city of Athens (cf. *Phaedo* 58a–c).” Strauss thus invites us to contemplate the possibility that Socrates’ piety was rewarded with the postponement, for perhaps as many as four weeks, of his execution at the hands of Athens—of an act, that is, which Strauss refers to three paragraphs later as “the legal murder” of Socrates (#20). A piety that transcends the city appears unwise (cf. *Crito* 54c6–8).

At the start of the next paragraph (#18), the last one of his interpretation proper,²² Strauss returns to the dialogue’s ending, which he now says “renders doubtful its chief result”—namely, “the suggestion that Minos’ laws are the best laws.” That this result should be rendered doubtful “is not entirely unexpected.” Explaining why, Strauss is now prepared to say something much more radical than what he earlier said: “For the suggestion that Minos’ laws are the best laws implies the view that law *can* be the finding out of what is and hence can be unchangeable, whereas Socrates’ definition of law implies the view that law can *never* be more than the attempt to find out what is and hence is necessarily changeable.” Whereas according to Strauss’ earlier formulation, law is not *necessarily* the finding out of what is (#6), according to his final one, law is necessarily *not* the finding out of what is. That is, law cannot be what it would have to be in order to possess the dignity that it claims for itself and therefore be *owed* our respect and obedience. Furthermore, Strauss appears to find in the alternative views of law implications for law’s alleged knowledge of being. He says that according to the first view—that law *can* be the finding out of what is—“men can be experts—can possess full knowledge—regarding the matter with which law is concerned,”²³ whereas according to the second view—that law can never be more than the *attempt* to find out what is—“men are ignorant

21 Does what Socrates is discovering or confirming about law through his conversation with the companion lead to the doubt Strauss speaks of?

22 Paragraphs 19–21 form a kind of appendix.

23 In this context, I take Strauss’ oblique phrase “the matter with which law is concerned” to mean “what is” or “being”; but cf. “the subject matter *to be regulated by law*” (#11).

regarding that matter." This difficulty can be resolved, he explains, "by suggesting that while men cannot be experts regarding that matter, they necessarily are knowers of it"; Strauss thus reminds us of an earlier distinction he drew, interpreting terms Socrates uses, between *expertise*, which he identifies with knowledge of causes, and *knowing*, which he identifies with knowledge of the pertinent facts (#11; see note 15 above). In the present context, he appears to be suggesting that we necessarily have knowledge of the forms (ideas or looks) of things that are but not of their causes (cf. #6). It would thus appear that according to law the world is knowable to an extent or in a way that philosophy denies is possible.²⁴ Be that as it may, Strauss continues by reformulating "the fundamental difficulty" with law that is suggested by the way the *Minos* ends: "law is always and everywhere the same and therefore one; law must be as variable as the needs of individuals and therefore infinitely many" (#18). Accepting this view, he adds, one reaches the following conclusion: "whereas in the case of man, justice, dog, the one (man as such, justice as such, dog as such) is of higher dignity than the many (the individual men, just things, dogs); in the case of law the one (universal rule) is of lower dignity than the many (the assignment of the proper food and toil to each man's soul) and in fact *spurious*." This appears to mean that laws understood as morally binding commands and prohibitions—commands and prohibitions that do not assign to each soul its proper food and toil but to which we nevertheless *owe* our respect and obedience—do not exist. Since Strauss' opening paragraph suggests that the *Minos* not only asks but answers the question of law, we note that what we are left with is the unrefuted "second and central answer" (#4): law is the decision of the city and, as Socrates elaborates it, intrinsically *purports*, but can do no more than *wish*, to be the finding out of what is.²⁵

The full gravity of the question of law has now become manifest: even laws believed to be divine do not fulfill the requirements of law, if law is to be more than coercive commands and prohibitions of which it can be known that they fail to give the proper food and toil to souls. For reasons already mentioned, the companion, unlike Socrates, can be led to accept the laws of Minos as given by Zeus; he may be as skeptical about gods, at least to begin with, as he is about law, but he is nonetheless moral.²⁶ Borrowing from another piece by Strauss, we might say that with the companion Socrates confirms that "moral man as

24 See, for instance, Socrates' account of his "second sailing" in the autobiographical section of the *Phaedo* (95e–105c, especially 99d–100a).

25 See Strauss (1953), 11–12.

26 Cf., e.g., #7 with #19.

such is the potential believer.”²⁷ That the companion was a potential believer is indicated by Strauss in the following way. In prompting the companion to say what sort of act of soul law might be, Socrates had asked whether it was perhaps an art like medicine or like soothsaying, by which art—“as the *soothsayers* claim”—the things that go on in the minds of gods are found (cf. #14). When commenting on the passage where it appears, Strauss is silent about this analogy (see #4); instead, he contrives to mention it later, when discussing a passage in which Socrates expresses, in the same form, a doubt that *cookery* is a genuine art (cf. 317a2 with 314b4). Since he observes that the companion is more certain than Socrates that cookery is an art, it appears that Strauss postponed speaking of soothsaying in order to imply that the companion is also more certain than Socrates, or at least more open to believing, that *soothsaying* is a genuine art. To stress the importance of this difference between Socrates and the companion, Strauss notes that it “comes to light in the *very center* of the dialogue.” To stress the importance that Strauss attaches to this difference, we note that the paragraph to which Strauss has postponed speaking about it is the 11th—the very center of his essay on the dialogue.

Finally, I believe we can now discern why Strauss calls the question of law “*perhaps* the gravest of all.” Strauss, in agreement with Plato, saw that question as inseparably linked to the question of the gods—that is, to what Strauss at the end of *The City and Man* characterized as “the all-important question which is coeval with philosophy although the philosophers do not frequently pronounce it—the question *quid sit deus*.”²⁸ The question “What is law?” is so *grave* a question because by having answered it one is in a position to answer, as far as humanly possible, the all-important question—which is why it is also a *preliminary* question, just as the *Minos* is preliminary to the *Laws*.²⁹ As Strauss puts it at the end of paragraph 16, after noting that the conversation of the *Minos* is based on ignorance of the function of the good legislator, “the whole praise of Minos’ laws must be reconsidered, as it is in the *Laws*.” The *Laws* opens with an “Athenian stranger” asking a man from Crete and another from Sparta (whose laws the *Minos* traces to those of Crete) whether a god or some human being took responsibility for arranging the laws of their cities. As the dialogue shows, the question of whether god or man gave a people its laws—whether its laws are divine in the sense of god-given—must be

27 Strauss (1973 [1952]), 140.

28 Italics in the original. For his own statement of the close link between the two questions, see Strauss (1983), 122.

29 “What is law?” could perhaps be called the gravest question, if by having answered it one had already in effect answered the all-important question.

addressed through an examination of those who believe that their laws could be divine. Upon examination, not only of the laws themselves but also of a Cretan who believes in their goodness, the laws of Crete prove to have been given by someone with a defective understanding of the aim of legislation, and hence not by a god; by the same token, the Athenian himself proves able on his own to fashion laws that, in the view of his two interlocutors, satisfy all the requirements of divine law. The grave question of the *Minos* is after all preliminary to the question of the *Laws*. Not surprisingly, the first word of the *Minos* is “Law” and the first word of the *Laws* is “God.”

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An Introduction to Strauss' "An Untitled Lecture on Plato's *Euthyphron*"

Wayne Ambler

One could be forgiven for supposing a conversation with so unpromising an interlocutor as Euthyphro could not settle much. He thinks he possesses divine wisdom and knows what piety is, but he contradicts himself readily, cannot always understand Socrates' basic questions (much less answer them adequately), sometimes forgets what has been established, and seems unfazed by his incoherence. Utterly in the dark about Socrates' true gifts, he enters the conversation imagining that he and Socrates are kindred spirits.¹

It is no surprise, however, that Strauss' lecture on the *Euthyphro* understands it not only to address a subject of great importance but also to be unusually radical in the way it does so (§19, p. 19; §1).² This said, it should be borne in mind that Strauss never published his lecture and that he begins it by declaring that the *Euthyphro* presents only a "half-truth": it is not Plato's complete teaching on piety (§1). Hearers or readers of the lecture must therefore resist the temptation to take it as representing either Strauss' or Plato's last word on the subjects it raises, but all this is perfectly compatible with its being a lecture from which there is much to learn. I will here try to show how its provocative main arguments help to bring out the perhaps surprising power of this short Socratic conversation with a young man whose convictions are strong but incoherent.

Before turning to a more patient look at the lecture as it unfolds, let me call attention to its main theme or question.

The lecture's most memorable declaration is perhaps the following: "Whether the Bible is right or philosophy is of course the only question which

* I am grateful to Eric Buzzetti and David Levy (of Rome) for their thoughtful suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.

- 1 The passages behind this overview include *Euth.* 10a1–5, 4a11–b3, 4d5–5a2, 11b6–d2, and 3b5–c4.
- 2 Parenthetical references are first to paragraphs of Strauss' lecture, of which there are 21. I will add page numbers when it helps to do so, and, sometimes, the letters "t, m, b" to indicate the top, middle, or bottom of the page. References are based on Strauss (1996).

ultimately matters" (§21). Although the word "philosophy" never appears in the *Euthyphro*, Strauss features it prominently. His lecture is not about piety in the abstract; it is especially about piety in relationship to philosophy or knowledge more generally, and it typically treats them as incompatible alternatives.³ Strauss implies we might prefer to find a compromise than to confront piety and philosophy as starkly opposed alternatives, but we cannot "eat the cake and have it" (§21, p. 21t). A related set of opposed alternatives guides the discussion especially in paragraphs 14–17: Are the primary beings gods or ideas? (§17, p. 17t). If they are ideas, knowledge may be possible; if they are gods, knowledge is not possible, for there is nothing permanent for the knower to know. Strauss calls the alternative between gods and ideas "so extreme that one would be very glad if it could be evaded" (§15, p. 16t). He even experiments with a way of evading this extreme alternative, but he appears to deem it unsuccessful (§16). Strauss returns frequently to this theme: the *Euthyphro* teaches that we face a choice or tension between stark alternatives, gods or ideas. The most apt response to the former is piety, to the latter philosophy.⁴

But there is a second prominent candidate for the most memorable conclusion of the lecture, one that presupposes but goes beyond the point just made. It is that one of these two extreme alternatives is superior to the other, at least on the basis of the *Euthyphro*, which teaches "that piety is superfluous and that the gods are superfluous except for the many" (§20, p. 20m). If we heard above that the ideas (and philosophy) and the gods (and piety) are alternatives, this passage dismisses the gods and piety as superfluous. As we shall soon see, it does so in favor of the ideas. Several other important passages also have philosophy and piety not as alternatives of equal rank but with the former in a position superior to the latter. If Socrates is pious, for example, piety is a virtue (§2). If he is not, it is not.⁵ Strauss also says that Socrates "transcends the dimension of the ordinary arts and virtues" in the direction of philosophy, whereas Euthyphro does so in the direction of "spurious knowledge" (§11, p. 13t). But how does Socrates' position establish itself as the superior one? How does philosophy earn the right to judge between "gods or ideas"? Does

3 See especially §§2–4, 9–11, and 21. It makes sense that Socrates would not mention philosophy to Euthyphro, who understands Socrates to be a diviner like himself. Euthyphro knows where Socrates conversed but not in what manner he did so (*Euth.* 2a1–3).

4 In addition to these two formulations of sharp oppositions (philosophy and piety [§2–7, 19, 21] and gods and ideas [§14–17]), consider also the philosopher and the city (§8 and 18) and philosophy and poetry (§15).

5 See also §§13–14, and note the calls for thinking and Socratic wakefulness, which both begin the lecture and bring it to a close.

Strauss see the *Euthyphro* showing not merely the rivalry between philosophy and piety but also the superiority of the former?

I am doubtful. Indeed, the view "that piety is superfluous and that the gods are superfluous except for the many," is identified as "an irritating half-truth" (§1, p. 5m; §20). It is an important part of the whole truth, but it remains merely a part. Still, a more patient look at the lecture will help explain the case for this "half-truth" as well as its limits.

I divide my review of the lecture into five sections whose boundaries are often blurry. These are as follow: Introduction (§1), Socrates' impiety and the political community (§2–8), the larger "cosmos" of the Platonic dialogues (§9–10), the different views on piety of Meletos, Euthyphro, and Socrates (§11–18), and an overview and conclusion on philosophy and piety (§19–21). Though aspiring to be comprehensive, my introduction will omit much in order to keep an eye out especially for Strauss' consideration of the questions raised just above.

1 Introduction: Paragraph One

Strauss stresses the limits of the *Euthyphro* before he begins to explicate it: while about piety, this dialogue is in Strauss' view only a part of Plato's analysis of this subject. But of course one cannot identify limits as limits unless one sees beyond them. The particular character of the *Euthyphro*'s teaching also urges one to look beyond it: it is unusually radical (§19) and even "irritating" (§1, 20).⁶ By stressing its limits he cautions us against accepting the radical suggestions it makes or irritating alternatives it poses. Seeing less irritating conclusions and even "comforts" that lie beyond the limits of the *Euthyphro*, Strauss assuages the irritation he finds in the *Euthyphro* itself (§1; 20; 5, p. 7b).⁷ He goes out of his way to indicate that the *Euthyphro* is part of a Platonic "cosmos" that shows signs of suggesting a perhaps less radical and certainly more satisfactory teaching on piety (§9–10). Even more directly, he mentions at the outset "two kinds of comfort" that Plato supplies, ones that do not depend on a particular teaching about piety (§1). The first is, "Thinking itself may be said to be the

6 Its teaching is irritating because it is unpopular (§1). Paragraph 18 explains the ineradicable roots of its unpopularity.

7 Strauss elsewhere asks whether speaking in order to comfort others does not require one to speak less sincerely. Strauss (2000) 30.

most satisfying activity regardless of the character of the result.”⁸ The second is that “Plato’s moral character” is such as to keep any conclusion from being in any way unsatisfactory or irritating (§1). Strauss supplies evidence for the former of these comforts in his thought-provoking manner of writing and by the beautiful invocation of Socratic wakefulness in his very last lines. One way he supports the latter, I think, is in the description of the cosmos just mentioned, a cosmos that may suggest that philosophy does not reject piety but culminates in it (§10; *Theaetetus* 176a5–b3).

It is nevertheless quite possible that the comfort Strauss sees as implicitly promised by Plato’s moral character does not derive from the immediate attractiveness of the thoughts he advances; he might mean there is sufficient comfort or satisfaction in seeing that these thoughts can receive a thorough or even conclusive examination. Indeed, Strauss stresses that grasping the issues under discussion requires a certain toughness. Courage is a necessary requirement of thinking consistently about piety (§14, p. 15m); we must “digest” certain truths, not merely grasp them (§1, p. 5); we must not “shrink” from their implications (§12, p. 14m); and the final paragraph identifies the spirit of philosophy as “serenity on the basis of resignation,” not hope or fear (§21).

Strauss stresses that irritating half-truths come with an advantage. We readily accept popular or traditional half-truths as if they were the whole truth, but we can reach irritating half-truths only if we think. Thinking successfully is more important than avoiding irritation. I am tempted to infer that irritating half-truths bring the gadfly’s advantage, but Strauss’ stated point is that we must think to reach the irritating half-truths of the *Euthyphro*, not that their irritating quality is what drives us to think further. If “thinking is the most satisfying activity” (§1), we have a motive to think our way even to irritating half-truths, not only a motive to think our way beyond them. But as Strauss’ essay as a whole will suggest, this all requires that knowledge be possible.

When Strauss says that the *Euthyphro* is paradoxical, he adds that this is also true of the other dialogues (§19), but when he calls its teaching “irritating,” he implies it is in a class by itself. Strauss may thus imply that even some of Plato’s other texts, if only in some respects, offer resting places for weary thinkers in a way the uniquely irritating *Euthyphro* does not.⁹

8 Contrast the case of the arts, such as those he discusses in 18, whose benefits depend upon particular outcomes that are outside of their power.

9 Strauss addresses a related point in his other bookend paragraph, 21, where he stresses the importance of recognizing the comic element in Plato. The taste for the tragic, which scholars possess to a greater degree, distorts the spirit of philosophy, according to Strauss. Among the “many reasons” for this scholarly failure, would he include Plato’s own intention? Consider

Strauss' emphasis on the importance of rigorous thinking is conveyed also by what he indicates about the way the *Euthyphro* is written. Good writing requires readers to think for themselves, at least partly because thinking itself may be the most satisfying activity. The *Euthyphro* never comes to a clear conclusion about what piety is. Strauss explains this at least partly in memorable terms: "No solution to the problem of piety shall be given lest the reader be prevented from seeking the solution for himself" (§12, p. 13). We must earn for ourselves the greatest benefit or satisfaction from our reading of Plato and perhaps from Strauss as well.

2 Socrates' Impiety and the Political Community: Paragraphs Two to Eight

This section contains three points worthy of special note. One is that Strauss invites us to assess piety by considering whether Socrates possessed it. Athens will soon try Socrates by the standards of orthodoxy; here we are summoned to the trial of orthodoxy by the standards of philosophy (§2, p. 6t). Second, Strauss declares with unusual clarity that Socrates was impious. Third, Socrates' impiety is not a sufficient explanation of the Athenians' actions against him: one could be impious and still go through the motions necessary to escape attention (§4). If his impiety did not lead directly to his conflict with Athens, what did?

The *Euthyphro* never says what piety is, but general opinion and the trial of Socrates, to which the dialogue often refers, imply one: "piety is worshiping ancestral gods, but according to ancestral custom" (§2). Strauss then asks whether piety is good (or is a virtue) and, on the grounds that Socrates was impious, infers that piety is not good. To reach this conclusion he rejects first-hand and friendly testimony in support of Socrates' innocence, for Euthyphro, a self-proclaimed expert, thinks it ridiculous that the Athenians have brought Socrates to trial on such a charge (§3).¹⁰ Strauss establishes Socrates' impiety

the solemn myths that populate a surprising number of dialogues, the declarations that were so moving to representatives of the Stoic and Neo-Platonist traditions, and his famous statement about having made Socrates young and noble (*Second Letter* 314c). Such considerations may help explain Strauss' Delphic reference to "Plato's moral character" (§1).

- 10 Similarly, Strauss' conclusion discourages one from being too quick to embrace philosophy, which must be well understood before its relationship to piety can be determined (§21).

first on the grounds that he professes to be ignorant of things one must know in order to be pious (§4) and second on the grounds that he claims to know things that run counter to what the city believes about the gods (§5). Both his ignorance and his knowledge convict him. Rather, they convict piety and Athens, for philosophy or Socrates himself is here the standard by which the goodness of piety is judged.

It is Socrates himself, of course, who stresses both that he has for a long time thought it important to know the divine things (§4, *Euth.* 5a5–8) and that he is ignorant of them (*Euth.* 6b2–3).¹¹ Socrates lives without having yet gained the knowledge he values so highly, but he continues to seek it. He certainly does not confuse the tales of the Athenians with the knowledge he seeks, and he may not see any reason to believe that the gods of the Athenians exist at all. How can one who knows that he does not know the divine things be an honest worshipper of gods whose existence he doubts? Socrates is thus not pious. Knowledge requires careful examination of all important claims (§4, p. 7t; see *Euth.* 9e4–7); piety does not.

After finding him guilty for his ignorance, Strauss finds Socrates guilty for his knowledge or for what he “seems to believe to know” about the gods. He seems to believe he knows the orthodox tales are wrong (*Euth.* 6a6–9) and that the gods are “good and just and, therefore, both the givers of all good things and only of good things to man and incapable of fighting with each other” (§5, p. 7b).¹²

Strauss interrupts his demonstration of Socrates’ impiety to stress that it does not explain why the Athenians brought him to trial: it is possible and perhaps not even difficult to feign conventional belief. If Socrates’ culpable ignorance did not lead by itself to the charges brought against him, what did? If there is an essential conflict between philosophy and the political community,

11 Strauss’ lecture does not include references to the pages of Plato’s dialogue; I cite the passages that seem to me to offer the most likely basis of Strauss’ comments.

12 I doubt Strauss is in earnest in attributing this view of the gods to Socrates. He makes a slight modification of the text to which I think he means to refer, *Euth.* 15a1–2, and when he returns to summarize his discussion, he stresses Socrates’ rejection of the orthodox cult but does not say again that he holds the positive view that the gods are good (§8, p. 8m). A possibly attractive and perhaps pious view of the gods is also implied in the penultimate paragraph of the lecture, but it stops well short of declaring them to be beneficent to human beings in general or to virtuous ones in particular. Nor does Strauss attribute this attractive view to Socrates. Strauss also denies that quoting Plato can resolve complicated questions (§10, p. 10), but the flattering view he attributes to Socrates rests on only a single line. Finally, on flattering views of the gods, consider Strauss (1983), 122.

where precisely should we locate it? Strauss takes up this distinct question, while continuing to weigh Socrates' piety, in paragraphs 4–7.

Following Socrates, Strauss calls attention to his "philanthropy" (§4). Or, more precisely, they both call attention to the philanthropy Socrates may seem to the Athenians to possess (note the *dokō* in 3d7). Euthyphro's bold claims about the gods only got him laughed at, whereas the Athenians will put Socrates on trial and convict him of a capital offence. Part of Socrates' explanation of this difference is that Euthyphro is not a ready teacher of his wisdom, whereas it appears that Socrates' philanthropy leads him to say profusely everything he knows to "every real man" and even to pay them gladly if they listen (*Euth.* 3d5–9).¹³ Neither Socrates' cleverness (*Euth.* 3c6–9) nor his impiety are sufficient to explain the trouble he got into at Athens, so Strauss puts his finger on Socrates' possible "missionary zeal," his "apparent philanthropy, or what is called in the charge, his corrupting the young" (§4, p. 7).

Strauss' discussion of Socrates' philanthropy proves helpful in highlighting a problem it does not solve. It shows that notwithstanding either the high importance Socrates placed on knowing the divine things or his impious rejection of orthodox views (§2, 4–7), his impiety alone would not have been sufficient to cause him problems in Athens. The question is what made his views public. Was it in fact "excessive philanthropy"? Strauss denies this and refers to Socrates' "apparent philanthropy." His defense of Socrates against the charge of an imprudent "missionary zeal" rests first on a survey of the *Euthyphro* (§6) and then on two points of caution he notes in Socrates' otherwise bold discussion of his theology in the second book of the *Republic* (§7). On this evidence Strauss draws the "provisional conclusion" that Socrates "was not guilty of that excessive philanthropy of which he feared that he might be thought to be guilty" (§7).¹⁴ This exoneration is the last of his four references to Socrates' "philanthropy." The question of why Socrates' radical theological views came to the attention of the public remains open.

Strauss' references in this context to the *Charmides* and the *Lysis* may help to answer this question (§7). Both dialogues show Socrates' enthusiasm for the conversations they report, whereas his conversation with Euthyphro results from an obligatory visit to the courts and is somewhat forced upon him. The

13 Strauss' paraphrase of this line adds to the Greek that Socrates would pay listeners only if he had the money to do so (4). This modification of the text shows one obvious limit to Socrates' possible philanthropy and is thus in keeping with Strauss' testing of it.

14 Of course Strauss' analysis of Socrates' philanthropy would have been different if it had been based not on Plato but on the Socrates of the *Clouds*, who was eager to share his radical critique of Zeus even with an old man ill-equipped to understand it.

difference between the two cases suggests again that Socrates' readiness to share his views is discriminating. Even if he does not go so far as to pay his interlocutors in the *Lysis* and the *Charmides* to listen to him, he engages in these conversations with the pleasure one might associate with the philanthropic attitude he describes (*Euth.* 3d6–9). Might these dialogues give Strauss a reason to call his defense of Socrates' restraint merely provisional (§7, p. 8m)? Do the *Charmides* and the *Lysis*—in contrast to the *Euthyphro*—offer better examples of what Socrates had in mind by his admittedly exaggerated portrait of his apparent philanthropy? Strauss finds it doubtful that Socrates had any effect at all on Euthyphro (§11, p. 12b), but was the same true of young men like Lysis and Charmides?

I mention only Charmides' notorious career at Athens and the conclusion of the *Lysis*. By the end of that dialogue the model son Lysis is "seen engaging in a minor rebellion against his family's authority" (Bolotin, 1979, 65–6; *Lysis* 223a–b). Although Strauss stresses that Socrates was not imprudent in the way he presented himself to the general public, he also calls attention to the range of attitudes with which Socrates entered different conversations and to the range of effects he had on those with whom he conversed. Socrates' effect on the young raises practical or political problems in a way his impiety per se does not. Hence, Strauss can refer to Socrates' "apparent philanthropy" as "corrupting the young" (§4, p. 7b).

Not finding philanthropy to explain Socrates' conversation with Euthyphro, Strauss suggests it is "an act of justice" (§7). If Socrates can show Euthyphro that he is not wise, he may induce him to suspend his prosecution of his father. He would at the same time make Euthyphro better, and it is prudent to make those with whom we live less harmful to ourselves.¹⁵ But this particular derivation of justice from prudence is beset by the problem that it can be dangerous to try to improve others; it can provoke resentment and retaliation. Whether prudent or not, Socrates' conversations in Athens were beneficial to him, to his friends, and to us, for it was from them that he and they learned about human nature and through him that we might (§7, p. 9t).

In this quick survey of the problem between Socrates and Athens, Strauss considers Socrates' impiety, his philanthropy, his justice, his prudent effort to make others better, and his effort to learn about human nature. I presume this declension of possible motives is intended to help us understand Socrates and, hence, philosophy itself (see the enjoinder to "see philosophy as it is" at the

15 See Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 25c–e.

very end of the lecture). In the end, Socrates' quest for knowledge underlies his other apparent concerns, including justice, at least in this paragraph.

Strauss returns in paragraph 8 to what he calls "the main issue, Socrates' impiety." His summary reconciles Socrates' belief that he knows the ancestral tales of the gods to be wrong with his professed ignorance of the divine things: Socratic ignorance is compatible with considerable knowledge. Knowledge that is insufficient for some purposes may be sufficient for others, as was already implied in the conclusion that Socrates is impious both in what he knows and in what he does not know.

After having stressed Socrates' impiety, however, Strauss now speaks for the first time of "true piety": if we knew what true piety was, we might well find Socrates to have been not less but more pious than others. At a minimum, if a Socrates thinks he knows that the ancestral tales are wrong, how reasonable is it to accept these tales as a basis for declaring him to be impious? By bringing "true piety" into the discussion, Strauss turns Socrates' relation to piety upside down. If true piety requires one to know the divine things, who is more likely to meet this requirement than Socrates himself (§8, p. 9)? Again, the philosopher is the standard by which the city and its orthodoxy are judged, and again the judgment is unfavorable. But now, perhaps, "true piety" may be invoked to help defend the philosopher, and orthodoxy would turn out to be not merely wrong but also impious.

If the law could be based on true piety, it would make sense to say that Socrates ought not to have been punished for impiety. This is not because we know that he was truly pious, but because only one as wise as he could know whether he was or not. Who can really claim to know the truth about the divine things? Strauss draws the apparent practical conclusion with an uncharacteristic statement: "I personally believe that [not punishing Socrates for impiety] would have been a wise decision," and he adds, "the most obvious message of the *Euthyphron*" is that "it would be wonderful if the crime of impiety could be wiped off the statute books" (§8). Yet Strauss immediately invokes Plato's own authority to resist this way of exonerating Socrates. According to Strauss, Plato himself would reject this "most obvious message" of the *Euthyphro* on the grounds that cities must treat impiety as a crime. He gives no explicit defense of the view he finds in Plato. Later, however, he makes a similar point and indicates that justice alone is often perceived as lacking a sanction sufficient to secure its widespread practice; piety and the gods promise to remedy this perceived insufficiency (§18, pp. 18b–19t). This political need for piety appears to hold even though one cannot expect cities to know what true piety is. The requirements of the city and of philosophy are fundamentally at odds.

3 The Larger Cosmos of the Platonic Dialogues: Paragraphs Nine to Ten

Paragraphs 9 and 10 do not take up the question just raised, of precisely why impiety must be treated as a crime. Rather, they make a new beginning, one that promises a “more exact analysis” of the dialogue and one that tries first to see how the *Euthyphro* fits in the “cosmos” of all the dialogues. Perhaps doing so helps point the way from the “irritating half-truth” of the *Euthyphro* to a more satisfying whole truth.

The cosmos of the dialogues might show piety to be a virtue even if the *Euthyphro* does not. There are dialogues on moderation, justice, and courage. If one rejects the authenticity of the *Theages*, which is on wisdom, then one might see the *Euthyphro* as Plato’s way of substituting a treatment of piety for one of wisdom, thus promoting piety to the rank of the four cardinal virtues. This very indirect way of defending piety as a virtue must face the obstacles that the *Theages* might not be spurious and that the *Republic* treats the four cardinal virtues, as well as the virtues of the philosopher, without mentioning piety as one of them. Moreover, the *Theaetetus* is devoted to science, of which wisdom is one kind; Strauss sees this too as discouraging the attempt to substitute piety for wisdom as a cardinal virtue. If the *Euthyphro* itself does not treat piety as a virtue, it does not seem that other dialogues do either. This partly playful attempt to see Plato as promoting piety to the ranks of the cardinal virtues ends in failure.

But if the overall cosmos of the Platonic dialogues does not supply strong reasons for thinking that piety is a virtue, the *Theaetetus* might do so on its own (§10). Instead of contrasting the philosophic and the pious life, the *Theaetetus* even calls upon the philosopher “to flee from here thither” and for assimilation to god (§10, *Theaetetus* 176a5–b3). Here, then, is a solemn text that gives us reason to see piety as a virtue and even a philosophic virtue. But no single Platonic text is determining, Strauss promptly notes, and he cautions the reader to consider the context here. He appears not to see the *Theaetetus* as rescuing piety from the treatment it receives in the *Euthyphro*.

If Strauss is not prepared on the basis of the *Theaetetus* to declare that science or philosophy culminates in piety, his mention of this other dialogue helps at least to emphasize the important relationship between science or philosophy and piety (§10, first two sentences). As we have seen before and will see again, Strauss’ discussion of piety examines especially its relationship to philosophy and the possibility of knowledge. Calling attention to the links between the *Theaetetus* and the *Euthyphro* helps to focus attention on this relationship (§9, p. 10t).

4 Distinguishing the Views of Meletos, Euthyphro, and Socrates: Paragraphs 11–18

Strauss again registers a sharp change in his immediate subject, which he now announces to be the “setting” of the dialogue. It would appear, however, that his focus is now on the main positions expressed or implied by the two interlocutors, with frequent references to Meletos as well.

Strauss' reading is distinguished above all by his detection of two radical theses latent in what Euthyphro says but of which he is largely unaware. The first of these is that piety is imitation of the gods, not obedience to them (§12–13). The second is that the ideas are prior to the gods (§14–17). Strauss sees these theses to be opposed to piety as ordinarily understood and perhaps to piety altogether. Understanding these critiques of orthodox piety, which the boaster Euthyphro implies but does not understand, seems to me to pose the greatest challenge of Strauss' lecture.

In the first of his three definitions, which Strauss clearly considers to be his most important one (§12, p. 13; §19, p. 19), Euthyphro remarks that piety is “the very thing that I am now doing.” He here refers to his prosecution of his father for murder (*Euth.* 5d8–9), which he understands to be based on Zeus' treatment of his father. Strauss seizes upon this first part of Euthyphro's definition for its implication that piety is imitation of the gods, not obedience to them. Euthyphro's few words imply a radical rejection of orthodox piety. If to be pious is to imitate the gods, then piety would no longer require the offering of sacrifices or the saying of prayers, for surely the gods themselves do not sacrifice or pray. Since the gods themselves are not pious, to imitate them would require that we too cease to be pious. Strauss concludes that to be pious in Euthyphro's sense is to become heretical or “deviationist” with regard to the beliefs and practices of ordinary Athenians (§12, p. 14). To follow this thought consistently, as Euthyphro does not, would require courage as well as insight.

To imitate the gods, however, one must know what the gods do, and Euthyphro's only idea of what they do comes from the common tales. This, however, is the same authority that insists we should obey the gods, not imitate them.¹⁶ Since Euthyphro thus fails to make a coherent break from these common tales, Strauss concludes bluntly, “He ought to return to orthodoxy” (§12).

While denying that Euthyphro makes more than a confused effort to escape an orthodoxy based on mere tales, Strauss takes Euthyphro's redefinition of piety seriously and supplies a reasoned foundation for it (§13, p. 14).

16 The view that the gods seek obedience, not imitation, is nicely expressed in the passage about Proteus to which Strauss alludes below. See Homer, *Odyssey* 4.353.

Euthyphro—or some part of him—seems to have stumbled on the radical view that one must be impious in the conventional sense of the term and imitate the gods in order to please them (§14, p. 15). To be radical is not necessarily to be correct, however. To support the radical case for imitation, Strauss uses the example of the wise man. If the gods are like the wise, they will prefer imitators to the blindly obedient (§13). This strengthens the case for piety as imitation, but at the price of substituting an unconventional and unconfirmed view of the gods.

Having contradicted himself one way, Euthyphro does so also in another. His effort to resolve this second contradiction captures Strauss' greatest interest and leads to his focus on the ideas, which dominate paragraphs 14–17.¹⁷ While piety as imitation would destroy piety as obedience, the ideas appear threatening to piety as such. And as I see it, at least, this threat to piety would hold whether piety is conceived as obedience to the gods or imitation of them.

Euthyphro implies that piety requires us to imitate the gods. He also says the gods are in radical disagreement with one another, even to the point of fighting. It is thus impossible to imitate all of the gods. To imitate one is to offend another. Euthyphro senses this and supplies this solution: he chooses to imitate Zeus, the most just and best of the gods (*Euth.* 5e5–6a3). To make this choice among the gods, however, Euthyphro must appeal to ideas of justice and goodness: he cannot know Zeus is most just if he does not know justice. But if he already knows what justice is, why does he need the example of Zeus at all? What he really seeks is to be just, so he seeks to imitate the idea of justice: Zeus is himself merely an imitator of this idea. Although he does not realize it, Euthyphro has just implied that Zeus and piety in general are superfluous. Hence, “The ideas replace the gods” (§14, p. 15).

Paragraphs 15–17 stress the starkness of the alternatives, gods or ideas (§15), consider whether there is a way to avoid or mitigate the opposition between them (§16), and reflect on their implications regarding the possibility of knowledge (§17). Euthyphro implied that ideas guided his choice of Zeus as the god to imitate; however, Strauss now substitutes Socrates as the champion of the ideas (§15, p. 15, and see *Euth.* 5c8–d6).

Seeing Socrates as the champion of the ideas does not defend him against the charge of impiety, Strauss notes, but it relocates his guilt. Socrates introduces the ideas, not gods or divine things, into Athens. Nor are the ideas new (*Euth.* 5c8–d7, 6d9–e6), for they are “the first things, the oldest things” (§15). Socrates

17 Strauss uses the word “idea” twenty-eight times in these four paragraphs. His only other uses are the two in paragraph 20.

had even formulated Meletos' charge against him to be that he is guilty of being a "poet" or "maker" of gods (*Euth.* 3b2), but the ideas are not made, and neither do they make. Socrates' accuser Meletos was a poet, but Socrates' view is "the radically unpoetic view" (§15).¹⁸

Strauss seems more concerned at this point to stress that there is an issue between piety¹⁹ and philosophy than to resolve it. He experiments with a way of avoiding the issue, but he appears to find the results more amusing than satisfying (§16). He thus devotes himself to sketching the implications of these stark alternatives, especially as they regard knowledge.

If knowledge is possible, there must be something for us to know, something prior to our knowing. If "genuine knowledge" is knowledge of something unchanging, of intelligible necessity, it makes sense to speak of the ideas as the primary beings. If one sees the gods as the primary beings, however, there would be nothing prior to the gods for them to know. Their action could not be guided, for example, by their knowledge of justice; it must be "blind" (§17, p. 17). It thus makes sense to think of such gods as being at war with one another; and if anything were to be deemed "just," it would be only because some god happened to so deem it at the moment, not because of its intrinsic merits.

Monotheism might seem to solve this problem, for it eliminates the possibility of fighting gods. But immediately after denying that the *Euthyphro* tries to settle the question of monotheism, Strauss says even a single god would have to be understood as being "good or just or wise." Giving up on holding that a god is good or just and hence is subject to preexisting ideas also means denying that this god could possess genuine knowledge. He could perhaps create anything, but there would be nothing fixed for him to know or to guide his creation; the god(s) subjecting them to infinite change, necessity or nature as we understand them would not exist. A god prior to the ideas would be a god who could permit or demand infinite changes in what is good or just. I infer that it would be as if there were many gods over time, even if there were only one divine will at every particular moment. Perhaps monotheism can solve the problems raised by the *Euthyphro*, but Strauss stresses rather the difficulties that it would face.

If Zeus were merely an imitator of ideas more fundamental than he, he would be superfluous. (As I understand it, he would be superfluous as a guide

18 See Strauss (1966) 311, for another strong statement of the opposition between poetry and philosophy, though it is silent about their possible disagreement over the primary beings.

19 Strauss does not mention the word "piety" in 15, but he takes "poetry" to be especially the making of gods.

for action, at least.) But since men in general do not find the gods superfluous, Strauss wonders why they are led to believe in them (§18). For this one paragraph, that is, Strauss turns from the effort to identify piety and test its correctness to the distinct question of why human beings cling to gods and piety as they do. He finds the *Euthyphro's* answer to this question in Euthyphro's third definition. Reflecting on this definition and the cross-examination it prompts, Strauss proposes two distinct reasons for our need for gods. One is the power of chance; the other is the weakness of justice.

Strauss already said one must have courage to be impious (§14), and he now speaks with some sympathy of the difficulty of accepting the extent to which what we treasure is vulnerable to chance (§18, p. 18m). It is not easy to fully digest the fact that what we most care about can vanish in an instant, so it is not surprising if we persuade ourselves that we have great resources with which to keep chance from destroying our lives. When we tend or serve the gods, we believe we secure their assistance where we need it deeply.

The legislative art is concerned with subjects in which genuine knowledge is especially difficult and disagreement is especially likely; its primary object is justice. Euthyphro divides justice into a part regarding men and a part regarding gods, the latter of which is piety (*Euth.* 12e5–8). Justice towards men is weak, unfortunately, for irrational men do not see clearly why they should be just. They need the powerful sanctions supplied by piety and by the gods, Strauss suggests, to remedy the weakness of justice towards men (§18, p. 18b). The practical needs of political life tie piety to the law, which is rooted in ancestral custom. Strauss thus links this case for piety to the case for law and custom.

From thoughts on what I would call the psychological and civic necessity of piety, Strauss returns to Socrates' effort to dissuade Euthyphro from prosecuting his father. The link, I think, is that if piety as understood in this third definition is ultimately in defense of custom and the law, then the pious Euthyphro should adhere more closely to prevailing customs and abandon the prosecution of his father, which violates them. The philosopher Socrates is here the defender or ally of orthodoxy; and in what the last sentence of paragraph 18 implies is a digression, Strauss affirms that "society is not possible if ancestral custom is not regarded as sacred as far as practice is concerned," so laws punishing impiety are necessary (p. 19t). In articulating this general principle Strauss treats Euthyphro as the one who must be muscled back to orthodoxy (§18, last sentences), even though Socrates represents a bigger threat by far to it (§8, p. 9). Perhaps the explanation is that Socrates is more aware than Euthyphro of the political need for orthodoxy and hence can defend it in some cases.

5 Overview and Conclusion: Paragraphs 19–21

Paragraph 19 offers a general look back over the *Euthyphro* and has two subjects: the first is its unusual movement from higher to lower, and the second is Socrates' comparison of Euthyphro to Proteus. With regard to the first, Strauss offers two different ways of explaining this movement. One pertains to the drama: Euthyphro's "heresy" becomes evident in his first definition, and then Socrates struggles mightily to bring him back to orthodoxy. The second movement is more theoretical: the (heretical) truth comes early in the dialogue, in Euthyphro's first definition, while "the basic error" is explained later. Rather than helping Euthyphro understand that his first definition contains the seeds of a powerful critique of orthodoxy, Socrates tries to show him that he lacks the divine wisdom he thinks he possesses and hence is not entitled to act on its basis.

Strauss stressed the importance and radicalism of Euthyphro's first definition some time ago (§12): piety is imitating the gods, not obeying them. Strauss takes this radical view closely with Euthyphro's invocation of the idea of justice to defend his selection of Zeus as the god to be imitated (§14–15). I take "the truth," then, to refer to piety as imitation, not obedience, and to the ideas as guiding the choice of whom or what to imitate. Strauss states the radical result in the next paragraph: the *Euthyphro*'s "irritating half-truth" is that that piety and the gods are "superfluous" (§20).²⁰

It is more difficult to say what Strauss means by the "explanation of the basic error." If the basic error is conventional piety, what is its "explanation"? Strauss explains the power and persistence of conventional piety most directly in his account of the human need to deny the power of chance and the political need to strengthen the sanction for injustice; both the power of chance and the weakness of justice help account for the prevalence of piety and the gods it requires (§18). Perhaps Strauss' indication of one reason for Euthyphro's mistakes also supports this general explanation: Euthyphro somehow stumbles on the core of a radical critique of conventional piety, but he lacks the courage to grasp or "digest" its full power (§12, 21).

When Socrates refers to Euthyphro as Proteus, it would be natural to note the irony: Euthyphro's claim to divine wisdom is dubious, and he changes "shapes" because he is confused, not because he is a divinely gifted escape

20 Identifying "the truth" with a "half-truth" would seem either to promote the latter or to demote the former. This too helps one wonder again what precise error keeps the half-truth of the *Euthyphro* from being the whole truth.

artist (*Euth.* 15d2–3; *Odyssey* 4.382–570). Strauss stresses instead the differences between Socrates and Menelaus, the questioner of the original Proteus. Unlike Menelaus', Socrates' problems arose out of his lapse from conventional piety; and even at this late moment, just before his arraignment on charges of impiety, he does not ask how he could better conform to the prevailing customs for offering sacrifice (§19, p. 20t). He tries to understand piety, not to become pious. Strauss' comments on Proteus underscore Socrates' probing unconventionality rather than Euthyphro's all-too-human incompetence.

Paragraph 20 returns to Strauss' opening statement that the *Euthyphro* conveys an irritating half-truth and now identifies it: it is "that piety is superfluous and that the gods are superfluous except for the many." As he did before, Strauss assuages the irritation provoked by this half-truth by looking beyond it. Whereas he before looked to the larger cosmos of other of Plato's dialogues (§9–10, 1), he might now appear to look even beyond the Platonic cosmos altogether. He flatly declares, "We know that the gods exist. Not indeed the gods of Athens, but the living gods." He traces this knowledge to "demonstration," to demonstration starting from "the phenomena of motion, of self-motion, life, of the soul." But this argument, that motion, self-motion, life, and soul are the foundation of a demonstration that gods exist, also turns out to belong to the cosmos of Plato's dialogues—as at *Laws* 10.894b–899d. Indeed, the Stranger argues in the *Laws* (at 892a) that misunderstanding "soul" is the key mistake of the atheists against whom he is arguing.²¹ This more pious argument of the *Laws*, which is rooted in soul, is silent about the ideas. The argument of the *Euthyphro*, which Strauss finds "irritating" and from which he concludes that piety is superfluous, is rooted in the ideas and is silent about soul. Thus the *Euthyphro* contains but a half-truth, and Strauss points us to Plato himself for the way to correct it.

Strauss' dramatic affirmation of the living gods' existence occupies just a few short sentences. Like his earlier appeal to the "cosmos" of the other dialogues (§9–10), it seeks in short order to put the more radical teachings of the *Euthyphro* in a more moderate and comprehensive context. But both passages also end with Strauss pulling his punches, leaving their ultimate bearing in some doubt. In the earlier passage, Strauss concludes by suggesting that the context of the pious teaching of the *Theaetetus* may render it ambiguous (§10).

21 For further evidence that Strauss had the *Laws* in mind when he wrote spoke of the demonstration of the gods in paragraph 20, consider that he elsewhere says the gods defended by the Athenian Stranger are subject to demonstration (1959, 32–3). This very passage also speaks of the Stranger's "philanthropy," as the *Euthyphro* and Strauss' essay on it also refer to Socrates' "philanthropy" (§4–7).

Here he concludes by suggesting that Plato might have justified the *Euthyphro*'s impious half-truth by teaching that the ideas are higher than the soul (§20, last sentence). Thus the two "half-truths" may not be equally incomplete. Moreover, he leaves it to us to test the adequacy of the arguments in the *Laws* that establish the existence of gods on the basis of self-motion and soul, just as he wondered aloud about the depth of the piety in the *Theaetetus*. Surely we are under no less a responsibility to test the arguments of the *Euthyphro* that seem to imply the existence of the ideas and of intelligible necessity.

The core of Strauss' conclusion is an explanation of why his interpretation and Plato's text are occasionally jocular, notwithstanding the seriousness of the issues they treat and the risk that this jocularity might offend some members of his audience. He makes his case with the help of an important passage from Plato's *Symposium* and a comment by Sir Thomas More. He concludes, "The beginning of philosophy . . . is not the fear of the Lord, but wonder. Its spirit is not hope and fear and trembling, but serenity on the basis of resignation" (§21). His last words express a beautiful call to Socratic wakefulness. I infer that the most important part of the whole truth that assuages the irritation accompanying the *Euthyphro*'s critique of piety is that philosophic thinking is possible, satisfying, and vouched for by Plato's reassuring example (§21, 1).

6 Final Questions

I acknowledged at the outset a question I cannot answer. It concerns the extent to which Strauss understands the *Euthyphro* as showing not only that piety and philosophy represent extreme alternatives but also as defending a judgment in favor of one of them. As noted above, his lecture sometimes takes the matter to be settled in favor of philosophy or the ideas, which would render the gods superfluous. (On the other hand and as just noted, he also affirms once, "We know that the gods exist," §20–1). But does Strauss see Socrates as trying to demonstrate in this dialogue that the ideas exist or that Euthyphro's claim to divine wisdom is wrong? I do not think so, so I am inclined to think one must look for these arguments and their examination further afield, if one is to seek the whole truth that lies beyond the "irritating half-truth" presented in the *Euthyphro*.²²

22 For a rather different reading of the dialogue, one that sees Socrates as trying to test the foundations of Euthyphro's claim to divine wisdom, see Bruell (1999) chapter 10, especially paragraphs 8–10.

Let me now acknowledge a possibly resolvable puzzle on the prior question, which is whether piety and philosophy, or gods and ideas, are incompatible extremes in the first place. I think I understand why Strauss says preexisting ideas would limit God or gods, but why would they render Him altogether superfluous (pp. 20m, 15m–b, 18b)? The idea of justice would make a just god unnecessary as a source or target for imitation, but is this the only reason we look to the gods? Indeed, Strauss indicates that people do not generally look to God as a model for imitation; we seek help in our attempt to control chance and to provide sanctions for justice (§18, p. 18). Would we not be happy with a God who was actually helpful in seeing justice achieved, even if we did not need Him as a model to identify it? It is taken to be reasonable to pray and sacrifice to the gods, I think, but who would pray to an idea? As I currently see it, the ideas would replace the gods only insofar as the gods are models for imitation, but men in general want something from them besides this. This is why, I think, Strauss sees the *Euthyphro* as teaching that piety is superfluous “except for the many” (§20). General opinion may be inclined to consider the gods especially from the point of view of what it wants from them, whether regarding chance or justice, but the issue between philosophy and piety concerns rather the existence of ideas or the intelligibility of things. If the absence of gods is a threat to cities, which need powerful sanctions to support justice, their presence is a threat to philosophy, which is Strauss’ chief concern here.

I think I have introduced Strauss’ lecture. I know I have not exhausted it.

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Eristics, Protreptics, and (Dialectics): Strauss on Plato's *Euthydemos*

Michael Rosano

Strauss stresses that the *Euthydemos* is Plato's "most bantering, not to say frivolous and farcical dialogue." Indeed, the dialogue appears to be a comedy of errors. Many of these errors are made by Socrates himself, who at times presents himself as a rather slow pupil, in dealing with ridiculous arguments of two sophists on serious topics. The main topic concerns how human beings, especially the young, can be exhorted to attain virtue or wisdom. The inquiry touches upon the deeper question of whether virtue or wisdom can be taught. The basic questions of what virtue is and whether wisdom is possible form a subtext. But the serious initial discussion evolves into a caricature of Socrates, recalling Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, before concluding with serious practical considerations. Strauss seems to stress the obvious: the *Euthydemos* is a parody of Socratic education. As such, it might fall short of a serious presentation of Socratic philosophy. But Strauss shows that the comedy magnifies sophistic eristics while obscuring Socratic dialectics in a way that defines Socratic protreptics. The *Euthydemos* is as serious as any other Platonic dialogue, not despite but because of its farcical quality. Strauss reveals its vital perspective on Socratic education and philosophy (67, 84–85).¹

Strauss is led to consider the *Euthydemos* after considering the *Crito* by the structure of the *Euthydemos* (67). The character Crito ties the dialogues together. The action of the *Euthydemos* precedes that of the *Crito*, thus the *Euthydemos* sheds light "retroactively or in advance" on the *Crito*. We may extend Strauss' view to the *Apology*. Crito, along with his son Critoboulos, is first among those Socrates calls as witnesses against the corruption charge. Crito has never been blamed publically by his fellow Athenians for bad behavior, and is singled out in his capacity as an old friend and a well-respected Athenian (*Apology* 33e, Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 48–49). But Crito later, in the dialogue bearing his name, blames Socrates in private for acquiescing in the jury's unjust sentence of death. Socrates' behavior is most shameful because he is abandoning his sons even though he always claimed to care about virtue (*Crito* 45c–46a).

1 All parenthetical page references are to Strauss 1983.

Socrates makes his famous argument for legal obedience, which he gives to the personified laws of Athens, to vindicate before Crito his decision to die and thus his concern for virtue (50a5–54d). Strauss thereupon makes his infamous observation that the argument of the Laws does not represent Socrates' philosophical reasons for dying (66). Thus, Strauss' use of the *Euthydemos*—Plato's “most farcical” dialogue—to shed light on the *Crito*—Plato's “most solemn” dialogue—reveals Socrates' concern for virtue, philosophy, and exhortation. But Crito mediates both dialogues. Strauss thus identifies two limitations that define Crito's perspective. The *Euthydemos* reveals that Crito's unawareness of Socratic irony is his “most important limitation” (67). The *Crito* reveals that Crito's “specific limitation” is his inattention to the “soul” as the seat of virtue and wisdom (58). Crito's limitations, along with his character and concerns, as they come to light in both dialogues, are keys to understanding Socrates' report to Crito in the *Euthydemos* and his reply to Crito in the *Crito*.

Strauss begins his prologue by analyzing the initial conversation between Crito and Socrates (271a1–273d8). He emphasizes that Crito opens the dialogue and is thus responsible for its taking place. “The dialogue is as it were imposed on Socrates” (68): Crito asks Socrates who it was with whom he was conversing the day before in the Lyceum. Strauss' qualification “as it were” indicates Crito imposes on Socrates only in a sense. Socrates could after all have circumvented the conversation. Crito is interested in Socrates' activities, assumes that Socrates' conversation with the sophists is philosophic, and affirms at the end of the dialogue that he loves listening to Socrates' discussions (304c7). But his initial question belongs to the “sphere of . . . ordinary curiosity.” It reflects his ordinary concerns. Strauss notes that Crito's question contrasts with Socrates' characteristic “what is” question belonging to the sphere of philosophy. Insofar as a crowd standing around Socrates and his interlocutors prevented Crito from seeing everyone and hearing anything distinctly, and since the conversation is called philosophic by Socrates, “we may say,” adds Strauss, “that Kriton's access to philosophy was blocked.” But Strauss' qualification “we may say” implies that Crito's access to philosophy was blocked by his ordinary intellectual capacity and concerns; he could, after all, have involved himself in the discussion if he so desired, but he decided to take a stroll instead (304d5). Crito's behavior stands in contrast to Ctesippos' pushing his way in to the center of the group because of his desire to see his beloved Cleinias and because he loves listening to these discussions (274c4). Ctesippos' erotic desire to see and to hear caused the formation of the crowd that blocked Crito's access to philosophy. Crito may love listening to Socrates' discussions, and he finds what he regards as philosophy to be charming, but he is not driven by a need to learn (304e8). Philosophy is an erotic activity; “Kriton is not an erotic man” (71).

Strauss implies that Crito's basic contentment with his ordinary life blocks his way to philosophy. Insofar as Socrates' depiction of this discussion as "philosophic" is ironic, Crito's lack of love of wisdom prevents him from distinguishing between eristics, dialectics, and protreptics. Crito emphasizes his ordinary concerns by revealing that he could see young Cleinias who reminded him of Critoboulos, but whereas Cleinias looks well grown and beautiful, Critoboulos is deficient. "We assume then," Strauss concludes, "that Kriton's initial question is inspired not by aimless curiosity but by paternal concern . . ." (68), that is, by the same concern that infuses Crito's arguments in the *Crito*. But in what way might Crito think that the charms of "philosophy" can help Critoboulos? Why does he not simply ask Socrates to help?

Crito believes that the foreigners with whom Socrates was speaking are sophists and wishes to hear about their wisdom; Crito, in contrast to Socrates, took no notice of them the last time they visited Athens. Socrates praises the brothers, Dionysodoros and Euthydemos, for their "wisdom." He then reveals his intention to study with them, and encourages Crito, who is wealthy and can pay their fee, to join him, and to bring Critoboulos as bait, because the sophists may decline to teach old men. Critoboulos would serve as bait for Crito as well as the sophists (272b5–d8). Crito's questioning whether Socrates is too old to learn shows his misperception of Socrates and his reservations about the venture. Socrates' revelation that the sophists were also old when they learned about eristics may clarify his interest in testing their capacity as well as in learning about eristics. Strauss observes that the "situation is the reverse of that in the *Crito* where Socrates uses his old age as a reason for declining the venture proposed by Kriton"; and that here Crito "surely does not show the eagerness he showed in the *Crito* (69). But Socrates declines to go into exile because it would bar him from philosophizing; Crito dismisses that concern in his eagerness to prolong Socrates' life and avoid further dishonor (*Apology* 37c4–38a7; *Crito* 45b5–c4). Crito nevertheless appears to defer to Socrates and asks him to explain what they are going to learn (271c–272d8).

Socrates begins describing his discussion with the sophists and the Athenian youths by crediting some divine dispensation and appealing to his customary sign, the *daimonion* (272e2–273). By preventing Socrates from leaving the dressing room, the *daimonion* "rendered inevitable the conversation with Euthydemos and the others." In other words, the *daimonion* "permitted," nay "sanctioned" the conversation. "No other conversation presented by Plato," Strauss notes, "has so high an origin," and this may "explain why the *Euthydemus* is so extraordinarily rich in Socratic oaths" (69). We may wonder why this comical discussion with second-rate sophists requires the support of this high origin and repeated oaths. Why must this conversation appear

imposed on Socrates by his *daimonion*? Why must it not appear to be brought about by Socrates himself?

Strauss implies that this conversation actually was brought about by Socrates. He connects Socrates' account of his *daimonion* in the *Apology* and Socrates' more intelligible account of his *daimonion* in the *Theages*. In the *Theages*, Socrates explains that he cannot teach Theages statesmanship as Theages wishes because he, Socrates, understands only "the erotic things." Theages believes Socrates is jesting. "Thereupon Socrates ceases at once to speak of his being an *erotikos*" and "instead speaks of his *daimonion*." Socrates' "*daimonion* replaces his being *erotikos* because it fulfils the same function—because it *is* the same." It is "needed only for justifying refusals to act." "Its full or true aspect is his *eros* as explained in the *Symposium*: *eros* is daimonic, not divine" (46–7). If Strauss' interpretation is correct and applies to the *Euthydemus*, Socrates appeals to his *daimonion* to justify a discussion brought about by his *eros*. But why is it best for Socrates to present this conversation with foreign sophists and highly placed Athenian youths as imposed by his *daimonion*? How does Socrates' appeal to his *daimonion* reflect Crito's reasons for "imposing" the dialogue on Socrates in the first place?

It is helpful to review Strauss' other observations on Socrates' *daimonion* pertaining to the *Apology* and the *Crito*. Crito is present on both occasions. Strauss notes that the Athenians were familiar with Socrates' *daimonion* (46). In the *Apology*, Socrates appeals to the *daimonion* as his agent preventing him from engaging in life-threatening activities and thus warning him away from politics in favor of exhorting others to virtue in private. In his post-verdict speech, he appeals to the *daimonion*'s lack of opposition to his defense speech, a speech that virtually ensured the death penalty, as evidence that the trial's result is good. We note that Crito rallied to Socrates' cause by offering to pay a substantial fine as an alternative to the death penalty. "But the silence of the *daimonion*," Strauss observes, "might not prove more than that death is good for Socrates now because of his old age" (52). In the *Crito*, Crito stresses that Socrates' behavior at his trial and acquiescence in his sentence is shameful and ridiculous. "In the conversation with Kriton," Strauss observes, "he barely alludes to the *daimonion*; he does not refer to the fact that the *daimonion* approved by its silence of his conduct at his trial." He adds: "Kriton was obviously as little impressed by the testimony of the *daimonion* as by the prediction conveyed through Socrates' dream: he did not believe in the *daimonion*." Strauss concludes with reflections on Crito's character: "Apart from twice swearing 'by Zeus,' he never speaks of the gods. He is sober or rather pedestrian, therefore narrow and hence somnolent regarding the things which transcend his sphere, his experience" (57). We thus return to a key question. Why

in the *Euthydemus* would Socrates, when speaking to Crito, defend his decision to have the discussion with the sophists by claiming to be guided by his *daimonion* and divine providence? Why does Socrates emphasize his strange piety before pedestrian, sober Crito in an effort to color his conversation with the sophists about exhorting Athenian youths to virtue?

Crito initiates the dialogue with Socrates for his own, rather pedestrian or non-philosophic, reasons. Socrates tailors his report of the prior day's discussion to influence Crito's perception of Socrates' activities. If Strauss is correct that Socrates' *daimonion* is a substitute for explaining actions that are guided by his reason and *eros*, then Socrates had reasons for bringing about his conversation with the sophists and the Athenian youths that Crito cannot understand. The appeal to the *daimonion* is ironic. But Crito is not simply unaware of Socrates' irony and does not credit Socrates' appeals to his *daimonion* and divine occurrences anyway. Why, then, would Socrates give Crito the impression that he is obligated by some higher being to have a discussion that he is in truth responsible for bringing about? Why would Socrates cover up reasons that Crito cannot understand with appeals that Crito does not credit?

Perhaps an answer to these questions can be found in the charges brought against Socrates in the *Apology* and in Socrates' public defense of his philosophical activities. The *Euthydemus* presents a discussion between Socrates, foreign sophists, and prominent Athenian youths in a public place. Crito, toward the end of the dialogue, reports that the crowd contains an influential Athenian who specializes in composing courtroom speeches and is critical of Socrates for his shameful catering to ridiculous sophists (304d2–305a9). This unnamed detractor reflects the concerns that led the likes of Meletus and Anytus to charge Socrates with impiety and corruption. Socrates' ironic appeal to the *daimonion*, providence, and oaths may be intended to insulate him, however thinly, against such charges. Just as Socrates uses the *daimonion* as a force beyond his control and beyond appeal to explain his actions to those who cannot understand his reasons, so, too, Crito can appeal to Socrates' strange piety to color Socrates' apparently strange behavior as long as Crito has his own reasons for respecting Socrates. Crito may not credit Socrates' appeal to the *daimonion*, but neither does he find it necessary to dispute it. Socrates' concluding eristic exchange with the sophists, in protest against their demonstration that he can treat the gods any way he pleases, supports this observation. Socrates insists that he has the same respect for the things of the gods that other Athenians have. But he then turns to Crito and admits that he was struck dumb by the argument (302b5–303a2). Crito must credit Socrates' respect for the ordinary things of the gods, and accept that his strange activities do not ordinarily compromise his concern for virtue. It is telling that not even the

unnamed detractor mistakes Socrates' apparent catering for actual agreement with the sophists in this case (305b). But Crito's concern with the opinion of Socrates' detractor sheds light "retroactively or in advance" on his reasons for imposing this discussion on Socrates in the first place.

If Socrates' appeal to his *daimonion* is a stand-in for his *eros* and reason, what specific considerations led him to stay in the changing room and thereby led to his conversation with the foreign sophists and Athenian youths? We may speculate that Socrates was already aware of the near proximity of the sophists and positioned himself to bring about his conversation with them. Socrates may have also known about the close proximity of Cleinias and his entourage and anticipated bringing together the two groups, or he may have just taken advantage of their fortunate arrival. Strauss observes that the sophists came into such close proximity of Socrates that Socrates could easily observe them walking several times around the cloister "without taking notice of Socrates." But surely the sophists were aware of Socrates' presence and were familiar with him, as Socrates makes clear, from their prior visit to Athens, and his reputation for being a "clever speaker" (*Apology* 17b). Socrates, then, was seeking to engage the sophists but they were avoiding him. Why would Socrates want to engage these sophists? Why would they avoid him?

The last time the brothers visited Athens they were experts in martial arts and forensic rhetoric, but in the meantime, and in very little time, as Socrates stresses to Crito (303c5), and as Strauss formulates it: "Above all, they have made themselves masters in the battle of speeches simply: they can refute everything that is said at any time regardless of whether it is true or false." "We assume," Strauss adds regarding Socrates' introduction of the brothers to Cleinias, "that Socrates had heard of their new claims but . . . deliberately refrained from mentioning their highest claim in order to hear that claim stated publicly by the brothers themselves." Their "highest claim" is that eristic excellence is tantamount to virtue (273d8). Socrates was seeking an opportunity to put them to the test. The brothers were avoiding Socrates because they knew that he would put them to the test in public.

The arrival of Cleinias and his entourage at Socrates' side provides bait for bringing the brothers to Socrates. "Kleinias did take notice of Socrates," observes Strauss, "...and hurried to him at once." We see that prominent Athenian youths such as Cleinias were on close terms with Socrates. Sure enough, when the brothers, who were looking for students, saw Cleinias, "after a short deliberation" and casting occasional glances at Cleinias and Socrates—for Socrates emphasizes that his attention was fixed on the brothers—they came over and sat beside Cleinias and Socrates (273 b1–10). They took the bait. The sophists and their entourage merge together with Cleinias and his

entourage. "It is in this way," Strauss observes, "that Kleinias' bipartite train, whose parts were joined only by chance, becomes in a manner the train of Socrates" (70). We questioned whether Strauss really thinks that Socrates credits this joining together of sophists, Socrates, and Athenian youths to chance. But in what way will Socrates use his dialogue with the sophists and the Athenian youths to test the sophists?

Strauss's second section deals with the first series of the two brothers' speeches (273c1–278e2). Socrates begins the discussion agreeably by praising the sophists and finding common ground between them and Cleinias. "Socrates introduced the two brothers to Kleinias as men wise not in the small things but in the great ones." They can teach one how to excel as a general and an orator. Strauss notes the differences between how Socrates introduces the sophists to Cleinias and how he describes their "wisdom" to Crito. To be sure, Socrates' description to Crito is "already colored" by what he learned from the sophists during their discussion. But it is tailored to suit Crito. Socrates does not speak to him about the brothers' mastery of the general's art because Crito, in contrast to Cleinias, the grandson of Alcibiades, is unlikely to aspire to that art for himself or his sons (70). But whereas Socrates tells Crito that the brothers can teach one to fight the battle of law courts, he tells Cleinias that they can "enable a man to help himself in law courts if he is wronged." Sober Crito does not simply connect legal action with justice (either here or in the *Crito*). Cleinias, young and idealistic, is apt to regard legal action as an agent of justice or to admire it if it is so presented. Socrates' report to Crito that the brothers claim to be able to refute any speech whether true or false also stands in contrast to the way Socrates allows the brothers to introduce their "wisdom" to Cleinias. Socrates implies to Cleinias that the brothers or their "wisdom" are not simply concerned with winning battles, but with virtue and justice. Cleinias' predisposition to virtue and justice conditions Socrates' treatment of Cleinias throughout the dialogue.

The sophists, in the contentious spirit of eristics, begin by disparaging Socrates and putting him in his place; they let him and Cleinias know that they are no longer primarily teaching the martial and legal arts, but are concerned with virtue; indeed, they "transmit virtue better and more quickly than any other human being" (70, 273e). But we may wonder whether this formulation of their "wisdom" is intended to impress Socrates and Cleinias or to challenge Socrates on his own terms. Strauss observes that "Socrates seemed to be deeply impressed by the claims of the brothers" (71). Indeed, Socrates begins his reply with an oath, wonders how they discovered such god-sent wisdom and, addressing them as akin to gods, announces that if they truly possess this wisdom, he must apologize for his poor introduction (273e1–274a2). Strauss thus

observes that “only gods, it seems, could conceivably give men virtue” (71). But Socrates qualifies his apology by adding that the vastness of the claim gives him reason to doubt it. Socrates’ test entails resolving this doubt. Insofar as Socrates already understands that by “virtue” the sophists mean “eristic superiority,” he already sized them up to some extent: “This power,” Strauss observes, “is necessarily identical with virtue if virtue is wisdom and if wisdom in the proper sense—knowledge of the most important things—is impossible” (70). That is, the power to win arguments is the best means of getting whatever one wants if there is no real hierarchy of good things culminating in the greatest good. What exactly, then, is Socrates doing by testing on fair-minded Cleinias the sophists’ apparently cynical claim to teach “virtue” most excellently?

The sophists claim they can teach virtue to anyone willing to listen. Socrates assures them that everyone lacking virtue will wish to learn, beginning with himself, Cleinias, Ctesippos and all those in the combined entourages of Cleinias and the sophists. Everyone present with the possible exception of the brothers thus lacks virtue and wishes to acquire it; Socrates may know that he lacks virtue, but do those others really know that they lack virtue and thus wish to acquire it in the same way as Socrates? The members of the group, beginning with Ctesippos, beg the sophists to display their wisdom. Strauss notes that they hesitate and give Socrates the opportunity to encourage them to display their wisdom to gratify the others and for his sake also: “Socrates thus indicated that his interest in the exhibition differs from the interest in it taken by the others.” This implies that Socrates views virtue differently from the brothers and the boys. And for the brothers’ part, the hesitation may reflect their sense of this difference and of the difficulty of satisfying Socrates as well as the boys. Do they sense that Socrates is setting them up by using the boys they are eager to teach, but they cannot get to these boys if they plainly fail or avoid that test? Socrates’ concern “appears from the question that he addressed to the brothers” (71): Can they teach virtue only to someone who is already convinced that he should learn from them, or also to someone who is not yet convinced, either because he does not think virtue can be taught or because he doubts that they in particular can teach it (274d7–33)? “There are,” Strauss adds, “reasons for believing that Socrates was doubtful whether virtue can be taught” (71). Socrates does not articulate these reasons but this Socratic problem somehow informs his test of the sophists or is a reason for it, and forms the central question examined in this dialogue. Dionysodoros assures Socrates that “one and the same art dispels both doubts,” and thus, Strauss concludes, “the teachability of virtue stands or falls by the brothers’ teaching virtue most excellently” (72).

These reflections may clarify Strauss's provocative conclusion. The sophists insist that they know what virtue is, can teach it in short order to anyone willing to learn, and can persuade anyone who listens to learn from them. In sum, the sophists assume that everyone has the capacity to learn what they have themselves learned in a short time. It is in part for this reason that Socrates later reports that their arguments have a popular or democratic and easygoing feature (303d5). Socrates' doubts about whether virtue can be taught thus may reflect the question whether the capacity to learn virtue as Socrates or even the sophists understand it is conditioned or limited by the gods, nature, or chance (cf. 280a3–281e2; *Republic* 415a–d). Finally, as a rule, virtue may not be teachable if knowledge of virtue or wisdom proves to be beyond the brothers' reach.

On the basis of Dionysodoros' affirmation, Socrates redirects the inquiry. Would the brothers not be best at exhorting others to love of wisdom or philosophy and a concern for virtue? Socrates, Strauss observes, "obviously assumed that virtue and wisdom are identical or at least inseparable" (72). The relation between love of wisdom and virtue is thus unclear but points nonetheless to the core of Socrates' concerns: Can love of wisdom or philosophy be taught? But Strauss observes that "it is not clear why he is concerned with exhortation." Perhaps the question of exhortation does not require settling the question of the teachability of virtue; people should be encouraged to strive for virtue nonetheless. But Strauss thereby implies that other reasons for turning to exhortation may bear directly on whether virtue can be taught. Is exhortation to virtue somehow identical to or at least inseparable from teaching virtue? Is exhortation to virtue inseparable from philosophy? The point that everyone can be exhorted to virtue reflects the sophists' egalitarian assumptions about teaching virtue. But can everyone be exhorted to an understanding of virtue that gives way or is identical to philosophy? Exhortation stimulates desire; but love of wisdom may be, more or less, a rare gift of nature. Socratic exhortation or protreptics, then, stimulates love of wisdom even as it encourages and tests the desire to attain virtue.

Socrates exhorts the sophists to exhort Cleinias to philosophy and virtue on the ground that the youngest and most advantaged member of the group is in the greatest danger of being corrupted (275a9). Socrates' concern with the exhortation of Cleinias obviously throws light "retroactively or in advance" on the issues surrounding Socrates' trial. By handing Cleinias over to the sophists, Socrates shows his concern to exhort the young to virtue. But Socrates already realizes that by "virtue" they mean eristic superiority. One may wonder whether his handing over of Cleinias is in the service of virtue conventionally understood or could instead be called a kind of corruption. Strauss thus

calls our attention to the difference between Socrates' treatment of Cleinias and his warning of Hippocrates against being harmed by associating with the sophist Protagoras in the *Protagoras* (311a9–314b7). By raising the possibility that Hippocrates is more corruptible than Cleinias, Strauss also implies that Protagoras may be more corruptive than are the amateurish brothers. But Strauss also implies that Cleinias is more resistant than Hippocrates to exhortation to virtue as love of wisdom or philosophy and thus is better suited as a subject to test the claims of the sophists. In this light, Cleinias, as the youngest and most advantaged member of the group, may be least likely to be turned away from virtue conventionally understood and such attending rewards as wealth and honor toward philosophy.

This may explain why Strauss also stresses that, unlike the story of Hippocrates, which Socrates reports to an unnamed interlocutor, Socrates reports the story of Cleinias to Crito, Socrates' old friend (72). Crito's view of Cleinias is colored by his conventional concern for the welfare of his sons. We may ask how Crito would regard the arguments of the sophists and of Socrates if Critoboulos were in Cleinias' place. Strauss' note about Socrates confiding in Crito anticipates Crito's reasons for asking Socrates to recount the conversation with the sophists, declining Socrates' invitation to join him as a student of the sophists, and defending Socrates and philosophy in his own way against the unnamed detractor in the end (304c7–305b3). Socrates therefore stresses that to convey to Crito the "amazing wisdom" of the brothers, he must, like a poet, apply for help to Memory and the Muses: "The narration," Strauss observes, "is a kind of epic poem; it is in a way as poetic as the speech of the Laws in the *Crito*" (72). Socratic epic poetry, as it were, is different from Socratic philosophy in method and intention. Socratic poetry makes an impression about Socrates on those who cannot understand philosophy that fills the gap between Socratic paradox and conventional wisdom. The poetry of the *Crito* and of the *Euthydemus* shed light on the impression that Socrates makes on Crito and respectable citizens like him. The speech of the Laws in the *Crito* in a way transforms Socrates from a ridiculous man into a tragic hero who dies serving justice and the law. The narration in the *Euthydemus* in a way presents Socrates as a comic figure who idles away his time in ridiculous discussions but who is taken seriously in the end. The common theme is that philosophy may seem ridiculous but is concerned with the most serious matters. Socratic poetry thus dimly reflects the truth about Socratic philosophy. In his interpretation of the *Crito*, Strauss emphasizes a difference between the *Protagoras* and the *Crito* that further illuminates Socrates' way of speaking to Crito. The conversations with Hippocrates and Crito each begins in the dark, but whereas the dawn

allowed Socrates and Hippocrates to see one another clearly, the conversation with Crito apparently occurred wholly in the dark, so that Crito would not have seen Socrates clearly (54–55). Strauss implies that Crito remains in the dark regarding philosophy, whereas the unnamed interlocutor in the *Protagoras* may be more able to see philosophy in its true light.

Socrates continues to present the eristics of the brothers to Crito and the Athenian youths as great wisdom. But the opening arguments used by the brothers to “exhort” Cleinias to wisdom and virtue—that the wise and the unwise are learners and not learners—are effective only at contradicting, confusing, and subduing Cleinias by exploiting the equivocity of words. “We on our part,” Strauss observes, “can hardly fail to notice that each of the two *elenchoi* looks like a Socratic *elenchos*.” There is, then, an apparent kinship but also an essential contrast between eristics and dialectics (cf. *Republic* 454a1–b2). Socrates reports that the sophists’ refutation of Cleinias is applauded by their admirers who, Strauss notes, he now calls their lovers, and Socrates seems to include himself among them, even though he is depressed by Cleinias’ fall. Socrates’ admiration reflects his desire to discover the “wisdom” of the sophists. Strauss adds that “from admiration to love there is only one more or less long step.” Socrates is prepared to love the sophists insofar as their eristics reflect protreptics or prepare the way to love of wisdom and virtue properly understood. But Strauss observes that the brothers’ argument implicitly results in the contradictory conclusion that either wisdom is impossible or everyone is wise, and thereby “leads us to the question whether wisdom is possible” and “points beyond the brothers’ wisdom” (73). Dialectics resolve contradictions that eristics take for granted; eristics may challenge conventional wisdom, but in contrast to protreptics, eristics tend to discourage philosophy in favor of more conventional pursuits (275d4–276e6).

Socrates stops the sophists’ performance as they are about to repeat it for the third time; he does not wish to see Cleinias further discouraged (277c8–d3). Strauss observes that his depression was gone and “very little was left of his admiration for the brothers.” But why does Socrates cease admiring the sophists and identifying with Cleinias’ lovers? “Socrates’ narrative,” Strauss adds, “must be presumed to be coherent on all levels.” Strauss’s core answer is that Socrates now understands that the sophists, instead of exhorting Cleinias to love wisdom, are playing rhetorical tricks that confuse and subdue him; but these tricks can also expose his need to learn grammar and rhetoric. Socrates likens their performance to preparation for initiation into a religious cult, that is, into the “sacred rites of sophistry” (73). But Socrates stresses that the brothers’ procedure cannot bring one any closer to discovering the truth

(278b5–9). Socrates loses his desire for their “wisdom” insofar as he realizes that it is a clever routine, as it were, to haze pledges before initiating them into the fraternal secrets of sophistry or the tricks of the trade.

Socrates puts the discussion back on track. The sophists should stop playing games and show Cleinias in what way one ought to be concerned with wisdom and virtue (278d3). “There are then,” Strauss observes, “various manners of urging on” (74). The sophists assume that if virtue is eristic superiority then the mere demonstration of their superiority would urge ambitious youths toward virtue (74). They excite enthusiasm to win and for themselves as teachers of winners. But Socrates indicates his disagreement with their actions and assumptions by turning to his own demonstration of an exhortation to wisdom and virtue; albeit one improvised on the spot and apparently uninformed and ridiculous (278e, 74; cf. *Apology* 17c, 38a). Strauss notes that Socrates intends to give “a doubtless poor specimen of what he understands by a protreptic speech” (74). Socrates is capable of “various manners of urging on” and thus the apparent “flaws” in this one are designed to correct and redirect the sophists’ deficient efforts. But in what manner will Socrates exhibit his protreptic art even as he reveals its particular limitations and thereby tests the sophists? Can the sophists in turn detect and correct the flaws in Socrates’ exhibition? Is Socrates testing whether the sophists can be turned away from eristics toward philosophy? Socrates’ protreptic speech, Strauss observes, “will be part and parcel of the sacred rites of ‘sophistry’ in the wide sense of that term” (74).

Strauss’ third section analyzes Socrates’ initial protreptic speech (278e2–283a4). The sophists presuppose that their “potential pupils are ambitious, that they are filled with desire for what they regard as a great, if not the greatest good” (74). They thus assume that they and all potential pupils already know what is good; they need only show that they can teach one to acquire highly desired goods such as wealth, honor, and political power. Socrates begins by making that assumption explicit. He induces Cleinias to state and correct the sophists’ premise by bringing him to agree that all humans desire to do well (279). Socrates clarifies what it means to “do well.” Anyone would say that acquiring good things such as wealth, health, and honor in one’s city amounts to doing well. Strauss notes that “the order would be one of assent for an ambitious human being.” Socrates then asks what remains in the class of goods, but without waiting for Cleinias’ reply, asks whether moderation, justice, and courage should be included among the good things. Although Socrates adds that someone might dispute this point, Cleinias confirms it without question. But, as Strauss observes: “It could be disputed on the ground that the only good things are those mentioned earlier and that the virtues are not necessarily needed for obtaining them” (74–5). This reflects the position of rhetori-

cians such as Thrasymachus that “justice is the advantage of the stronger” and is implied by the brothers’ view that eristics are a form of power to acquire sought-after goods (*Republic* 338c). Socrates shows by his series of leading questions that he expects Cleinias to overlook the tension between virtue as a good and as a means to the goods. It seems that the virtues rise above the prior goods in the order of ascent for a good citizen or human being.

Socrates then asks where in the troop they should place wisdom, and Cleinias places it among the goods (279b9–c2). Strauss observes that only after Cleinias affirms wisdom is good does Socrates have him confirm that the list is complete. “Wisdom,” Strauss adds, “apparently belongs to another class of virtues than moderation, justice, and courage” (75). Wisdom tops the list of goods. But just as the virtues are a different kind of good than wealth and political honors, so also is wisdom a different kind of good than the virtues. Is wisdom a virtue? Socrates does not define wisdom or its relation either to ordinary goods or to moral virtues. Instead, he suddenly turns to “good fortune” as the commonly recognized greatest good, to which Cleinias agrees. Good fortune trumps wisdom at the top of the conventional hierarchy of what an ambitious human being desires because it seems to be necessary or sufficient to acquiring all other good things. But Socrates, announcing that they have ridiculously repeated the prior point in different terms, equally suddenly turns to “wisdom” as good fortune. Does this imply that wisdom is the greatest good? This proposition confuses and astonishes Cleinias insofar as the possibility that wisdom is the greatest good brings him beyond conventional wisdom; is wisdom, as good fortune, the surest means to attain common goods, or is wisdom the greatest good (279e)? Good fortune is having goods and having them is good fortune. Can wisdom always secure good fortune or the good things necessary to happiness as Socrates brings Cleinias to affirm rather simply? Cleinias, as expected, fails to notice that Socrates’ example of seafaring qualifies the fantastic result, as Strauss puts it, that “wisdom is, humanly speaking, omnipotent” (279e5–280b3, 75). For the capacity of wisdom is limited in particular cases by natural forces or natural ability and this shows its general dependence on good fortune. Wisdom may require qualities of mind or soul that are gifts of nature. But is Strauss implying that Socrates indicates that wisdom, humanly speaking, is the necessary and sufficient condition of human happiness?

Socrates brings Cleinias to agree that ordinary goods are good only when they are beneficial, and thus, they agree that goods must be possessed and used correctly (281). Socrates implies the question, observes Strauss, “whether a wise man who is poor . . . can be happy” (75). In other words, to what extent are ordinary goods procured by so-called good fortune necessary for happiness and thus the proper objectives of wisdom? Neither Socrates nor Strauss

needs to recall Socrates' infamous poverty (cf. 85, *Apology* 23c). The right use of qualified goods requires prudence and wisdom. Socrates brings Cleinias to agree that the wrong use of such goods is harmful and worse than not possessing or using them; indeed, it is better to have their opposites. Common sense might support the claim that riches badly used are harmful and it is better to be poor, but Socrates asks whether imprudently used moral virtues are more harmful than their opposites. Are the virtues qualified goods or are they good simply and a condition of happiness? Cleinias agrees that a coward without intelligence is better off than a courageous man without intelligence, i.e., than a foolhardy man. But, as Strauss observes, Socrates gives him no opportunity to decide the case concerning moderation and immoderation, and even less opportunity to decide the case concerning justice and injustice insofar as he refrains from even mentioning it. But what could even less than no opportunity mean (cf. *Apology* 38a1–8)? Socrates has reasons for raising and then avoiding the question of whether justice without intelligence is worse than injustice; Cleinias does not notice the problem. Perhaps mindless moderation can obstruct justice, but can justice ever be bad insofar as mindless justice can obstruct wisdom? Strauss confirms that it verges on the absurd to say that it is better for the unintelligent person to practice injustice rather than justice; it is much better to say that "justice seems to be the only good, the only virtue that is beneficent (on the whole) even if not guided by intelligence, perhaps because the laws which the just man obeys supply the lack of intelligence in the man himself" (76). The abstraction from justice is thus an abstraction from laws, and Strauss notes that Socrates "is silent about the laws in the *Euthydemus* as distinguished from the *Crito*." But this connects Socrates' salutary treatment of Crito in the *Crito* and the *Euthydemus*. Laws, like moral virtue, can be construed and obeyed or used intelligently or unintelligently and thus beneficially or harmfully in particular circumstances. It is not absurd to say that mindless obedience to unintelligently made or foolish and bad laws obstructs justice and wisdom.

The density of Strauss's footnotes in this section to related treatments of qualified goods and moral virtues found in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and Plato's *Republic* and *Meno* indicates the philosophical problems implied by Socrates' apparently superficial treatment (76). Indeed, Strauss stresses that this treatment implies "the ruthless questioning of what Aristotle would have called the moral virtues" (76). Strauss's recourse to the word "ruthless" reflects back on the dispute over whether moral virtues are simply good or a means to greater goods that Socrates allows Cleinias to avoid. "Socrates and the brothers," Strauss will soon

add, “agree as to virtue proper being different from ‘moral virtue’” (77). But they seem to draw opposing conclusions; if wisdom is the greatest good, goods such as honor along with moral virtues are good only insofar as they produce and are guided by wisdom. Wisdom is not only the greatest good, stresses Strauss, it is the “sole good.” Wisdom is virtue. Strauss adds that Socrates’ treatment of moral virtue before Cleinias is “most appropriate in a speech meant to exhort to the practice of wisdom” (76). We may add that it is also appropriate in a protreptic speech that reveals problems one must grasp in order to pursue wisdom.

Socrates brings Cleinias to conclude that everyone must strive in every way to become as wise as possible. Beseech lovers to assist one, not in the pursuit of money, but of wisdom in every way that is not base but noble. True lovers, be they fathers or friends, nobly join together in love of wisdom as the greatest good. But the key question whether wisdom can be taught remains unsettled. Cleinias’ enthusiastic assertion that wisdom can be taught shows he is eager to be wise and virtuous on his own terms; and this shows the success of Socrates’ exhortation in some way (282c1–7). But Socrates, Strauss observes, “did not say that he and Kleinias have reached agreement on it”: Socrates does say that Cleinias’ agreement saved him a long inquiry as to whether virtue is teachable (76). Socratic protreptics encourage philosophy; but Cleinias, “young and simple-minded,” fails to grasp problems that may reveal the limitations as well as the possibilities of teaching wisdom and virtue, despite his enthusiasm for attaining virtue (279d9; cf. *Republic* 435d, 504b).

Strauss’s observation that “Socrates and the brothers agree as to virtue proper being different from ‘moral virtue’” may speak to his concerns for testing their claims. But their eristic art presumes that wisdom proper is impossible, and that “moral virtue” is a means to acquiring ordinary goods such as riches and honors, perhaps inferior to other means that one educated in eristics might pursue. Socrates’ exhortation to wisdom and virtue, by contrast, implies the possibility of wisdom concerning what is good, and thus of how best to procure and use all other goods; this entails the necessity of grasping the way moral virtues might be good simply and a means to wisdom. Strauss observes that by exhorting Cleinias to pursue wisdom by honorable means, “Socrates admits that there is some awareness of the honorable which antedates the acquisition of wisdom” (77). The desire to be honorable or noble is a gateway to answering the question of whether moral virtues are a means to riches and recognition or bridges to and manifestations of wisdom. Being aware of this question may be a critical step toward knowing whether wisdom is possible and can be taught. Socrates corrects the sophists’ presupposition

that wisdom is impossible and thus eristic “virtue” should be taught, even as he exhorts young Cleinias to virtue in terms sober old Crito can respect, while also showing the way to philosophy.

Strauss marks this as “the turning point in the dialogue” inasmuch as Socrates stresses to Crito that he was paying the greatest attention to “what manner the brothers would lay hold of the speech and from where they would start exhorting Kleinias toward wisdom and virtue” (77, 283a). Socrates’ emphasis on the provisional nature of his exhortation reinforces the impression that he could have done it differently, and that his method tests the “manner” and “starting point” of sophistic exhortation. Socrates’ report to Crito that the brothers’ exhortation was “wondrous in a way” indicates his reservations. In sum, they fail the test, but perhaps in an instructive way, and Socrates keeps up the pretense of praising them to Crito (283a9).

Strauss’ fourth section analyzes the central series of the brothers’ speeches (283a5–288d4). He begins by suggesting that it may be a good omen that Dionysodoros, the elder brother, started the conversation; presumably because he is more mature and more likely to take his task seriously (77). But Dionysodoros ceases to address Cleinias, disregards Socrates’ arguments, and continues his eristic display by seeking to refute Socrates. Socrates’ assurance that he and Cleinias’ lovers are serious about wishing that Cleinias become as wise and good as possible allows the sophist to conclude that they wish him to be other than he is and therefore to be dead (283c3–d9). Strauss’s point that this thesis could be viewed as a “most shameless admission” that sophistic “education in wisdom is corruption of the young,” reminds us that citizens cannot easily distinguish between Socrates and sophists (78). Strauss notes that the “obvious reason” Socrates fails to rebuke Dionysodoros for his levity is that Ctesippos interrupts the argument in a fit of moral indignation over the suggestion that he wishes the perdition of his beloved. But Strauss implies that Socrates also has a deeper reason. Does the sophists’ contention imply the Socratic consideration that philosophizing is learning to die (78; cf. *Phaedo* 64a)? Socrates reveals throughout the discussion that many sophistic arguments imply Socratic questions. There is, then, a qualified affinity between sophistic eristics and Socratic protreptics. Part of the testing of the brothers, as indicated above, may involve their dim awareness of these problems and this affinity.

But Socrates’ salutary treatment of Cleinias and Ctesippos and the methods and goals of the sophists stand in vivid contrast. “It was to be expected,” Strauss notes, “that the sophists would arouse sooner or later the susceptibilities of a hot tempered young gentleman,” and thus “... Socrates was forced to intervene to prevent a conflagration” (79). The sophists, Socrates muses,

call “corruption” what ordinarily would be education to virtue and wisdom: destroying the bad and senseless in order to make human beings good and sensible. Consequently, he hands himself over to the sophists for restoration. Strauss observes that Socrates’ intention of studying with the sophists, which he reports to Crito, has in a sense already happened the day before “with a view to appeasing Ktesippos’ wrath against the sophists” (79). Socrates can appease Ctesippos because Ctesippos is sure that Socrates promotes virtue and opposes the corruption of the young. Socrates reconciles Ctesippos with the sophists (285b–d).

Strauss observes that the prudential requirements of reconciling the Athenian youths with the sophists obscure the fact that Socrates decisively, if initially without fanfare, twice refutes their assumptions about the superiority of eristics. Strauss notes that it is Euthydemus, the “wisest or cleverest of the brothers” that Socrates refutes. Socrates politely reveals the contradiction regarding contradiction they share with many of their predecessors including Protagoras. In sum, restates Strauss: “If it is impossible to lie, to say or think a falsehood, all men are wise, and there is no need for teachers like the brothers” (80, 286c–287b). Socrates’ claim that he has always been astonished by this argument because it is so often used by sophists despite contradictions regarding contradiction, and that he has never yet heard it adequately defended, may further clarify why Socrates is testing the brothers (286c–d). But Socrates cannot now expect these sophists to resolve that contradiction. The contradiction reflects their methods and goals. Strauss observes that Socrates calms Ctesippos by reminding him that the brothers are not being serious, but Socrates now speaks of their “witchcraft” and “studiously avoided the word “play” and derivatives from it” (80). Socrates may be testing the threshold separating eristics from protreptics, and he implies that despite appearances otherwise the sophists mean business, and fill gaps in their “wisdom” by casting rhetorical spells. But his proposal to continue exhorting Cleinias in the hope of inducing the brothers to become serious precisely because he believes they will display something worth beholding certainly leaves us wondering precisely what he is still looking for by testing their “wisdom.”

Strauss’ fifth section analyzes Socrates’ second protreptic speech (288d5–290e1). Strauss observes that Socrates’ finessing of the conclusion of his earlier exhortation—that one must philosophize—ignores that they suspended judgment on the pivotal question of whether wisdom is teachable. Cleinias’ tenuous grasp of Socrates’ argument, shown by Socrates’ reframing of the issue and by Cleinias’ regressive sense that “riches” are good, lets him “correct” or make explicit now, in his second protreptic speech, presuppositions of his first speech: knowledge of how to make or possess a good thing must coexist with

knowledge of how to use it correctly (288e2–289a5). Socrates, Strauss observes, “corrected in his second protreptic speech the defect of the first—the defect which consists in the abstraction from the power of chance” (81). Are human beings simply dependent on chance for the opportunity and ability to produce and use goods that condition wisdom and virtue, or can they ensure those conditions? Strauss implies that the question of the teachability of wisdom is connected to these conditions. Is Socrates implying that philosophy is more capable than eristics and all other arts in producing and using the conditions of virtue because it entails knowing the limitations and possibility of achieving wisdom?

Young Cleinias, despite his initial mistake, now seems to step forward, as Strauss notes, with “amazing” “self-confidence” in determining that the arts of generalship and forensic rhetoric cannot satisfy the criterion of the knowledge at issue (81). Does that criterion reveal why the brothers abandoned teaching those arts for eristics? Is Cleinias now showing the power of Socrates’ protreptics? He concludes that those who possess those arts cannot also use the results; he implies that they cannot use them beneficially. But Socrates acknowledges that the “art of making speeches” is marvelous at enchanting crowds and, as Strauss summarizes it, “and the like.” We note that “and the like” includes “juries and assemblies,” and thus pertains to the prior questions about whether mindless obedience to laws made by “enchanted” human beings is just and good. We have already surmised that eristic “witchcraft” enchants without knowing how to benefit. Strauss adds parenthetically: “We must not forget, however, that “the art of making speeches” is an ambiguous expression: the art of making speeches that Socrates possesses is inseparable from the art of using them” (81). Cleinias now applies the criterion to the likes of astronomers and geometers who hand over their findings to the dialecticians for use. “For this remark” Strauss adds, “Kleinias was praised by Socrates very highly—as highly as never before or after.” Is Cleinias making a real distinction between the production of scientific knowledge and the inability of scientists to put it to good use and the ability of dialecticians to use knowledge beneficially? Is he implying that the dialectical art is best at using knowledge to produce wisdom and virtue? But Socrates refrains from indicating that dialecticians, too, fall short if dialectics is an art of using; Socrates thus refrains from correcting Cleinias by pointing out that the dialectical art of using speeches is inseparable from making them. “The ironical character of his high praise,” Strauss notes, “did therefore not become quite obvious” (81). Cleinias does not detect Socrates’ irony at all. “Obviously encouraged,” Cleinias reports that generals also hand over their conquests to those who exercise the political or kingly art (289d1–290c8). But this implies that the political art, too, is limited because it does not produce the

material it applies. Does Cleinias also misrepresent the political art? Strauss concludes: "Within the context of the discussion the defect of dialectics and of politics . . . cannot but redound to the benefit of eristics. And that defect was due to the use of a criterion established by Socrates" (82).

"But why is eristics to be benefited" (83)? Strauss leaves this question hanging in the air as he turns to his fifth section analyzing the central conversation between Socrates and Crito (290e1–293a8). He marks the way Crito interrupts the narrative. But Strauss reformulates the problem and restates the question explicitly at the end of the section. He thereby indicates the context in which to examine the question. The answer reflects the importance of Crito and comes in this form: Crito interrupts Socrates because Cleinias' apparent brilliance reminds him of his difficulty in educating his own son. Moreover, he is sure that Socrates' report of Cleinias' brilliance is false. "He is then by no means incapable," Strauss affirms, "of becoming aware of Socrates' irony in any point" (82). This qualifies Strauss's initial point that Crito's inattention to Socrates' irony reveals his "most important limitation" (67). Indeed, Crito shows his capacity to speak ironically by confirming Socrates' ironic restatement that some higher being must have made those remarks instead of Cleinias or Ctesippos (290e1–291a9). "Kriton's reaction to this claim," Strauss adds, "is of the same force as if he had said in the *Crito* that not the laws but Socrates had made that impressive speech" (82). Crito knows that Socrates put those arguments in the mouth of an idealized Cleinias. He is nonetheless impressed by the arguments. But can Crito grasp the point of Socrates' irony?

Crito is interested in the argument. By asking Socrates whether he and Cleinias ever found the art in question, Crito becomes a participant in the discussion, as it were, at the side of Cleinias, as Strauss observes, and thus asks how Crito would react to Socrates' protreptic questions (82). We see Crito's way of reacting to Socrates. He affirms that the kingly art, by ruling over the city and producing the conditions for such good things as wealth and freedom, may be the art in question. At first glance, like Cleinias, wealthy Crito sees wealth as a great good. But he can grasp that wealth and freedom are qualified goods insofar as they require knowledge of a greater good to direct them to happiness. In what way, then, can the kingly art supply that knowledge, i.e., make human beings good and wise (291b–293a9)? "Kriton," Strauss observes, "knows that Socrates and Kleinias were in a great predicament: he is not affected by it and has no suggestion to make as to how that predicament could be overcome" (83). Crito does not notice that the political art may produce means of human happiness but is defective in producing and using wisdom and virtue. The argument implicitly corrects the fictitious Cleinias' comparison between politicians and dialecticians. One would have to engage in dialectics to see the

point. Crito is at the threshold of dialectics but neither engages the argument nor alters his desire for wealth for himself and his son. He cannot see the point of Socrates' irony.

But Crito is not completely unaffected by Socrates' argument. After Socrates (ironically) throws up his arms in despair over his inability to discover the required knowledge and begs the sophists to save the argument, Crito asks whether Euthydemus consented to help (293a1–9). He also misses the implication that eristics cannot produce real benefits. But Crito notices the superiority of Euthydemus over Dionysodoros, and has, as Strauss observes, "become mildly interested in Euthydemus' wisdom" (83). Is he also comparing Euthydemus with Socrates? Strauss observes that Socrates seems to confirm by deed the view of some of his critics that he excels in exhorting others to virtue but cannot guide them to virtue. But Strauss raises the question whether that criticism in the context of this dialogue is rooted in Socrates' "almost complete disregard of dialectics," and that "dialectics is obviously the required art or science" (83). But Strauss implies that Socrates is not disregarding dialectics altogether; Socratic protreptics bring interlocutors through exhortation to virtue conventionally understood toward dialectics by encouraging them to discover problems for themselves. Dialectics are built into Socratic exhortation. But so is Socratic irony. Strauss thus adds that we must seek the reason why Socrates abstracts from dialectics. One reason may be found in the result of the deed insofar as it "redounds in the circumstances of the dialogue to the benefit of eristics" (83). Does Socrates benefit eristics because citizens like Crito, who cannot really distinguish between eristics and dialectics, can thereby in some way appreciate or respect philosophy? But Strauss asks and leaves the question of why Socrates benefits eristics open once again; he thereby indicates that the above answer is incomplete.

Strauss' sixth section analyzes the final series of the brothers' speeches (293a8–304b5). He indicates that Euthydemus puts Socrates' question about the required art on the "broadest possible basis" (83). The implicit question of whether virtue can be taught is replaced by the question of whether the art that produces and uses wisdom and virtue can be discovered. Socrates implicitly brings the discussion full circle by bringing the sophists to engage the question of whether wisdom is possible. Can Socrates teach the brothers to transform eristics into dialectics by resolving their contradiction regarding contradiction? Perhaps it comes as no surprise that they continue their eristic tricks, but with a difference. In sum, the sophists contradict Socrates' replies to their questions so as to present caricatures of a number of Socratic problems such as Socratic ignorance, the doctrine of recollection, the doctrine of the ideas with reference to the beautiful, and Socratic piety (293b1–303a2).

The blatant comedy obscures the extent to which sophistic contradiction steps away from conventional wisdom toward Socratic dialectics. Strauss' observation that Socrates and the sophists agree that wisdom is different from moral virtue reflects the way that dialectics and eristics both criticize conventional wisdom. Conventional citizens, in part, cannot distinguish between Socrates and sophists because of this qualified kinship. Socrates, then, may benefit eristics because eristics, correctly applied, defines contradictions that can prepare the way to dialectics, and the desire to acquire sophistic "virtue" might be turned toward Socratic love of wisdom and virtue.

This does not mean that the brothers can be turned toward philosophy. Despite his high praise of their wisdom and willingness to play along with them, Socrates clearly does not take them seriously. He shows this by comically breaking the rules of eristics in reply to the sophists' "dialectical" arguments about "knowing": Strauss adds: "the true dialectics was completely forgotten" (84). But, although feigning ignorance, Socrates nonetheless breaks the rules in ways that point to dialectics. One marker is his repeated insistence on using the word "soul" to identify the seat of knowledge in place of the sophists' circumlocutory formulations and in the face of their hollow protests (295b4, 295e5). Socrates then exposes the confusion in the sophists' assumption that wisdom is impossible, and thus they eristically determine what is known, and insist that Socrates knows everything; he asks how he knows that good men are unjust. Strauss reminds us to consider "the previous difficulty regarding justice" (84). Euthydemus cannot believe his ears and takes Socrates to be saying that good men are just, and Dionysodoros walks into Socrates' trap by making a weaker argument rather than say something revolting; he is chastised by his brother and made to blush before Socrates and the boys. The sophists are caught betwixt and between understanding justice as a means to power and as virtue in its own right (296e5–297b). Socrates, akin to his shaming of Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, reveals that the brothers do not grasp the implications of their sophistic wisdom (350d3).

Socrates presents himself to Crito as "acting the part of a rather slow pupil" (84). He concludes his report to Crito by admitting that he is overwhelmed by the brothers and rejoins the lovers in praising them highly for their accomplishments. But chief among their qualities is the fact that they do not care for the opinion of the many people who are not like themselves. Most people, he warns, would regard it as more shameful to refute others with such arguments than to be refuted. "This sense of shame," Strauss observes, "has nothing to do with the awareness of unfair advantage." In fact, the sophists' speeches are "popular or populist and gentle" (86). This sense of shame, then, is rooted in the sense of honor that informs moral virtue and "antedates the acquisition of

wisdom" (77). Finally, they have so perfected their art that anyone can learn it in a short time; Socrates advises them against teaching in public lest they give away their wisdom cheaply and to stick to teaching in private those few who are like them. He concludes by asking the brothers to accept him and Cleinias as students. Strauss need not point out once again that all of this is hardly high praise; or that Socrates has already turned himself over to the brothers in order to mediate between them and Ctesippos. We may wonder whether Socrates implies that he is in some way like them and mostly philosophizes in private.

Strauss' epilogue analyzes the final conversation between Socrates and Crito (304b6–307c4). Socrates encourages Crito to join him in studying with the brothers. Strauss notes that Crito declines Socrates' suggestion on the basis of Socrates' other suggestion that he belongs to those who would rather be refuted than refute others with Euthydemian speeches (86, 304c7–d2)). But we recall Strauss' observation that Socrates intimates "the specific limitation of Kriton by studiously avoiding the word 'soul' " in the *Crito* (58). Socrates' above insistence on using the word "soul" highlights the way he and Crito are not alike. It is no more surprising that Crito declines Socrates' invitation to study along with him in the *Euthydemos* than that Crito exhorts Socrates to live without philosophizing in exile in the *Crito*. Crito is simply not philosophic. But he is concerned with virtue despite or rather as part of his sobriety, and respects Socrates as one who is always most concerned with virtue.

The *Euthydemos* moves toward its conclusion with Crito informing Socrates of the criticisms of the unnamed acquaintance that specializes in writing forensic speeches. The man is critical of the sophists for making ridiculous and useless arguments, of Socrates for catering to them, and of Crito for catering to Socrates (cf. *Republic* 487b1–d4). It is clear that Crito has these criticisms in mind throughout the dialogue. It is also clear that he takes it for granted that Socrates' discussion with the sophists is philosophic; and yet he defends what he takes to be philosophy as something "charming" (304d2–305b3). "Kriton," Strauss observes, "repeats his disagreement with the unqualified disapproval of the brothers' speeches but he feels that Socrates is to be blamed for publicly disputing with them" (87). Crito, in some way, sees philosophy as good and separates Socrates' strange disposition and activities from his unqualified concern with virtue, and the charms of philosophy from the indecent way it is practiced by the sophists. Crito cannot see Socrates clearly because he cannot connect Socrates' concern for virtue to Socrates' love of wisdom. Socrates nonetheless vindicates Euthydemus, philosophy, and himself by pointing out the limited wisdom and ambition of those who write forensic speeches and the superior wisdom and different activities of philosophers and politicians (304d4–306d1). Socrates, Strauss notes, "tacitly repeats the radical distinction

between dialectics and the kingly art" (87). Strauss need not recall Crito's earlier disinclination to consider the problems of the political or kingly art and the apparent defect of dialectics and of politics (to say nothing of speech writing); or to repeat that, in the context of the conversation, these limitations redound to the benefit of eristics as modified by Socratic philosophy (81).

Crito finally turns to the other subject that has been on his mind—Critoboulos—and stresses that Socrates always reminds him that education is more important than such affairs as money making and match making, but he cannot find a suitable educator to turn Critoboulos toward philosophy (306d2–307a3). Like father, like son. We doubt that Crito regards philosophy of paramount importance when he is not being charmed by Socrates. However that may be, as Strauss observes, "he does not dream of asking Socrates to apply his protreptic skill to Kritoboulos nor does Socrates offer it" (88). Socrates does encourage Crito to scrutinize philosophers as he would all practitioners of arts to find a good one and then to decide for himself whether philosophy is beneficial or not (307c1–6). To take Socrates' advice, Strauss concludes: "One must carefully examine philosophy itself" (88).

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Strauss on the *Apology* and *Crito*

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At the time of his death in 1973, Leo Strauss was putting together a book that would be titled *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*. We owe it to Thomas Pangle and Joseph Cropsey that the book was eventually published, posthumously, and that its chapters appeared in the order that Strauss had intended, absent the still unfinished chapter on Plato's *Gorgias* [Cropsey, (1983) vii]. "On Plato's *Apology of Socrates* and *Crito*" is the second chapter of the book, following one titled "On Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy."¹ In the first several pages of that first chapter Strauss writes mainly about Nietzsche and Heidegger; and he reveals considerable sympathy for the concern, central to these two thinkers, that humankind is in danger of losing its very humanity. The danger is posed by the excessively abstract and ultimately nihilistic sort of thinking that *they* believed to have been inaugurated by Plato. Strauss does not in that chapter mount a direct response to Nietzsche or Heidegger; he simply asserts that Heidegger's call for a new dialogue that would involve the deepest insights of the Orient with the rationalism characteristic of the West has produced "hopes more to be expected of a visionary than from philosophers..." (34). With no further explanation he turns his attention to Husserl. The reader is expected to understand. Nietzsche and Heidegger had each hoped to save humanity through a new *Weltanschauung* or *Weltanschauungsphilosophie*; however in Husserl Strauss finds the insistent and carefully drawn distinction between *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* and philosophy as rigorous science. Husserl thought that once we become fastidiously aware of the demands of philosophy as rigorous science it might be many centuries before such philosophy could yield a genuine, rigorous *Weltanschauung*. Heidegger, in Husserl's implicit judgment, had been impatient. Strauss' response to Husserl, in turn,

1 On Plato's "Apology of Socrates" and "Crito" had been written earlier for a collection that would be published in 1976 as *Essays in Honor of Jacob Klein* (Annapolis, St. John's Press, 1976). It seems likely that Strauss had intended *On Plato's 'Apology of Socrates' and 'Crito'* for the Klein book as a statement on how *he* had come to understand Plato's "esotericism," insofar as he and his old friend had as youths congratulated each other for having "rediscovered esotericism." That is to say, Strauss came to see esotericism as deriving from the political character of Plato's political philosophy. [Green, p. 463]

is that Husserl had not understood fully the dangers that are implicit in his own insight. Husserl was politically naïve. He had failed to appreciate the dependence of nearly all human beings in political society on some sort of *Weltanschauung*, or perhaps he had falsely presumed that in modern society there could and would be many *Weltanschauungsphilosophen* living in some degree of harmony with one another. That is to say, Husserl's faith in enlightenment had caused him to fail to understand the limits of toleration.

Plato, Strauss thought, had seen those limits as well as their cause more clearly. Nearly all human beings in political society exhibit an irreducible need for some comprehensive account of the whole world and their own place within it; and yet our unassisted reason appears unable to provide such an account. The result is always that human beings lie to themselves. The city is a kind of collective lie in whose terms citizens presume to ground their duty and their ultimate hopes. This is the meaning of the cave as Plato's most famous metaphor for the city. Because he understands this situation fully, Plato, or rather Plato's Socrates, is always in a state of some tension with his city. In his conversations with and cross-examinations of others, Socrates risks disclosing the lie in their souls to those who find such a disclosure impossible to bear. At the same time, because he understands his dependence on his city, he always seeks to be governed by a prudence that seeks to prevent that tension from being mutually destructive. This prudence governs the rhetoric that Strauss shows Socrates employs in his apology so as to represent himself, but also in a way to misrepresent himself, as being innocent of Athens' charges that he corrupts the youth and does not believe in the city's gods.

In the first paragraph of "On Plato's *Apology of Socrates* and *Crito*," Strauss tells us that "... the *Apology of Socrates* is the portal through which we enter the Platonic kosmos: it gives an account of Socrates' whole life, of his whole way of life, to the largest multitude, to the authoritative multitude, to the city of Athens before which he was accused of a capital crime; it is *the* dialogue of Socrates with the city of Athens (cf. 37a4–7)" (p. 38). In the dialogue's central section, however, Socrates says that if he states the unvarnished truth concerning his whole way of life, namely that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being, his hearers would not believe him (37e–38a). Insofar as this is true, though, it would appear impossible for the dialogue to be, simply, what Strauss claims it to be. So what might Strauss be meaning? Socrates' statement that his hearers will not believe him must itself be understood in the context of his whole apology. It comes after the guilty verdict has been pronounced, which in turn follows his elaborate and brilliant attempt to give an account of his way of life in such terms as could be intelligible, or more familiar, to the Athenians. The richness of the dialogue derives from just this startling fact—

that Socrates is attempting to overcome through his amazing rhetoric what is, strictly speaking, an impossibility.

But why? There were alternatives. He might have fled from Athens. Or, as he acknowledges, he might have spoken at the trial in such a way as to appeal to the sympathy of the jury (38d–e), and very likely have been successful. It is not unlikely that many who were angry with Socrates would have been satisfied to see him eat crow and beg for mercy and would have voted to acquit him if he had allowed them that satisfaction. Why did he do neither of these things? The answer would have to be that Socrates defends himself in the way he does because that strategy is imposed by the pertinence of the question that Strauss wants us to see. The question is, “why philosophy?” One might say that the fundamental reason that Strauss returns with renewed interest to the entire Platonic corpus is that through that return he draws forth that question as from an oblivion into which it had fallen. For the question, “why philosophy?” cannot be undertaken in a serious way if the “answer” is already given as a prejudice among those few who find it self-vindicating. There is a propriety, indeed a necessity, for philosophy’s accounting for itself before a tribunal of ordinary human beings who will ask: Is this strange activity a *good* thing? Or is it not rather destructive of everything we cherish and honor, and need to cherish and honor? Such a propriety would not exist if philosophy existed in a vacuum, beyond all community with fellow human beings. That, though, is not the case. The defense of philosophy would have to be a demonstration that it can explain itself to the city that “feeds” it on such terms as will enable those fellow citizens to acquire an inkling of what philosophy is—an inkling from which the city will derive an effect that common sense judges salutary. This is the demonstration that Strauss intends to show us through his analysis of the rhetoric of the *Apology of Socrates*. Understanding it fully would entail that we understand as Socrates does the nature of the political community, and the requirement of being politic—two fundamental ingredients of political philosophy.

At the very outset of his apology, Socrates exercises a clever rhetorical maneuver. He denies that he is being rhetorical at all, in contrast to the accusers, whose rhetoric was obvious and to be expected. As if to apologize for lacking the stylistic conventions of a law court, Socrates asks the jury to pay no attention to the manner of his speech but only to its content. He will tell the simple and unadorned truth. And at the same time Socrates asks the members of the jury to attend to the manner in which he speaks so as to corroborate that he speaks innocently, as it were. Socrates’ claim to artlessness of manner is then a “lie,” which word Strauss uses in this context so as to prevent us from being thoughtless in our sympathy for Socrates. We see too that whatever

chance Socrates might have had actually to win his case would have depended on most of his jury being charmed by his manner of speech rather than, or along with, what it contains. One might dwell for some time on this transparent pretense to self-revealing transparency. At very least we may imagine that Strauss has swept the dust from the inscription over this "portal" to Plato's world. *Be Cautious—Beware.*

Socrates' next step is to say that the charges of the formal indictment are really outcroppings of a somewhat vaguer body of prejudice that has existed against him for a long time. He will never succeed in responding to the current charges unless he takes up the older prejudice. That older prejudice, however, is somewhat complex and ambiguous. In its origin it was that Socrates had examined all things beneath the earth, that he thought about the things aloft and that he rendered the weaker argument the stronger. Strauss points out that in that original form, the prejudice did not include the charge that Socrates was an atheist. That part of the prejudice was added, as a likely corollary, by people who heard the original rumors regarding Socrates' scientific examinations. Even as including atheism, however, those old rumors did not prove deadly dangerous to Socrates right away. Apparently the Athenians were capable of some toleration of a miscreant and heretic in their midst. Were this not so, the prospects for Socrates' philosophizing having any home in Athens would have been considerably worse. The rumors took a more dangerous turn when Socrates came to be thought not only to harbor heretical thoughts but to teach them as well. The addition is attributable to that wise poet, Aristophanes; however it was originally added in the mode of a comedy and not necessarily believed. It was a caricature: malicious and sportive, and very funny. Aristophanes had been bold to hold many of Athens' personages to ridicule. Comic jests, though, can get out of hand. So, was Aristophanes in fact responsible for reformulating an old prejudice about Socrates that gave it its ultimately lethal point? Doubtless he was. At the same time, though, he gave Socrates an opportunity to defend himself somewhat more effectively than he would otherwise have been able. That is, Socrates is able to respond with something more than a flat denial to the charge that he was a teacher. Teachers get paid, do they not? As everyone can see, Socrates is as poor as a church mouse. Strauss comments dryly that this appeal to what everyone can see does not really answer the suspicion that Socrates might have held certain views privately and even taught them privately, with or without direct remuneration (40).

If the old prejudice against Socrates is as completely false as he says, the obvious question is: why should it exist at all? Is there not something about him that accounts for it? This question is perfectly reasonable and Socrates has

to say something in response to it if anyone is to take his previous denials seriously. So Socrates explains that the prejudice is a consequence of his piously dutiful attempt to solve a riddle. He tells a story that his friend, the late and somewhat excitable Chairephon, once went to Apollo's Oracle at Delphi and asked whether anyone was wiser than Socrates. We note parenthetically that Chairephon must have already had a notion that there was something that gave Socrates a claim to wisdom, and thus that some form of the old prejudice must have existed in *his* mind at least. In any case, upon Chairephon's report to Socrates of the oracle's reply—that no one was wiser than he—Socrates claims to have been perplexed. "I am the wisest of men?" he asks himself, "but surely there are others. . . ." So Socrates sets about examining others, poets, political men, artisans of various sorts, with the intention of discovering what they knew that made them wise. He would then demand that the oracle account for the apparent contradiction. For surely, the god could not lie. Try as he might, however, poor Socrates could not find anyone wiser than himself. His attempts, which invariably took the form of a cross examination of others' claims to wisdom or indeed any kind of knowledge, always had the effect of exposing their claims as fraudulent and this naturally incurred the anger of those he examined, especially the political men. So they, not being able to admit to the actual reason for their annoyance with Socrates, brought the stock-in-trade charge against him that he was all of those things that became the old prejudice, including that he was an atheist. Thus, the old charge was not simply an inference from rumor after all, but the product of rancor maliciously spread by people Socrates had embarrassed.

What do we make of this story? It is probably the case that we incline to take it sympathetically but not literally. Specifically, as Strauss points out, the story fails as an account of Socrates' ongoing life of examining others since it cannot be taken to explain why Socrates continued that activity after he had drawn the conclusion about what the oracle had actually meant. Socrates ultimately concludes that the oracle had not meant that Socrates was wisest in the sense that he had presumed but rather that no one is wise. All claims to wisdom among human beings are false; at least Socrates is in a better condition than most because he sees *that*. Still, Socrates continues his cross-examinations, as if he needed to drive home a point he had already reached. Then too, even on its own terms the story is odd. Socrates advances it as if to underscore his piety. Far from being an atheist, Socrates has run a great danger in dutifully serving the god. This "service," though, is a queer sort of piety. Socrates is not exactly doing as a god clearly bids but rather he is testing the god—holding the god's feet to the fire, so to speak. In a way, what Socrates describes as "piety" is a directing of his annoying cross-examination towards the god himself (p. 42)!

If this be piety, it is paradoxically of a hubristic sort. Those inclined to be sympathetic towards Socrates might be moved to smile at this general feature of the story. Those unsympathetic could only dismiss it as one more annoyance.

For the story about Delphi to be in any way persuasive, however, for it to be at all useful in Socrates' defense, it must contain something that the jury can reference. Socrates did annoy many people through his cross-examinations. But why? Whatever Socrates might have been like once long ago, something happened to Socrates that made him different, not only from most other people but even from those who did in fact investigate and speculate and who may even have been atheists. What is at the core of Socrates' peculiar, annoying, hubristic brand of piety? This is the riddle of the story that, thanks to Strauss' attention to detail, rivets our further attention. This much is clear: What Socrates means by piety is not identical to ordinary piety. The question of Socrates' guilt or innocence ultimately depends on the question of the relationship between these two forms of piety.

The question regarding Socrates' piety, or it might be better stated as the issue regarding Socrates' highly questionable piety, is continued and further illuminated in the section of his apology where Socrates confronts the current formal charge. Socrates is said to be a corrupter of the youth and, as Strauss notes, Socrates "chose to read" the latter part: "he does not believe in the gods in whom the city believes but in other daimonic things that are new." (p. 43). In this section we are treated to a sample of Socrates' typical skill at cross-examination. He cross-examines one Meletus, one of the three who brought the charge against Socrates. Under Socrates' cross-examination Meletus is shown to be a poor fool, incapable of explaining just what he means by his charges without contradicting himself. But what does Meletus' embarrassment really prove? What could it mean for us to learn that there was, once upon a time in Athens, a fool named Meletus who was exposed as such by Socrates? In the early part of his exchange with Meletus Socrates comes close to proving that he could not be guilty, not willfully/criminally guilty, of the corruption charge because no one could be. If Socrates corrupted anyone, he did not intend to, and he deserves to be "punished" rationally, i.e., educated. Is it reasonable, though, to expect that any city could accept the implications of Socrates' argument on this point and punish transgressions only in the way that Socrates would be willing to accept? To do that would require that a city abandon its presumption that its citizens had the moral freedom to act in such a way as to be held personally responsible for their actions and to deserve sometimes to be rewarded and sometimes blamed or punished. We conclude that this part of Socrates' defense against Meletus is really a counter charge, i.e., an indictment of the city itself for failing to be a truly rational community among

friends. The argument may reach some thoughtful members of the jury, and Plato's audience, but it could hardly be generally persuasive on the occasion.

Within the pages of his interpretative essay, Strauss treats very compactly the whole exchange between Socrates and Meletus. Socrates had explained that he knows nothing. But, Strauss asks, might this not be thought to concede to the corruption charge (43)? For must the city not demand that every citizen know that it is good and noble to obey the laws? On the other hand, if despite his knowledge of nothing Socrates does know that he does not corrupt, is this part of the "nothing" the knowledge of which he owns? How could this be? Strauss responds with two possibilities, and they are by no means mutually exclusive. In the first place we might say that what Socrates means by saying he knows nothing is that he does not have knowledge of the greatest things or of the whole of things. Lacking that, he does not have whole or complete knowledge of anything, for the knowledge of a part of a whole, absent the knowledge of the whole, would itself be partial. Still, the knowledge that we human beings both need and yet lack, a complete knowledge of the whole, would be knowledge in a certain sense, and perhaps it is the germ of what Socrates does know about our human situation that enables him to know what does and does not improve or corrupt. In the second place, perhaps the nothing that Socrates knows does include a certain knowledge about god or gods and that Socrates knows that for others to attain that knowledge would not be corrupting. How, though, might that be true? That is, what does Socrates know about the gods? To this Strauss reminds us that Socrates shows Meletus to contradict himself. Socrates knows that Meletus thinks that Socrates' knowledge of ignorance is either reducible to atheism or that it is a camouflage for atheism. Yet Meletus had written in the formal indictment that Socrates did not believe in the city's gods but rather in other, new, daimonic things.

It seems very likely that Meletus' vulnerability to the trap that Socrates laid for him derives from the deeper and meaningful confusion from which he suffers in connection with his anger at Socrates. Meletus' anger explains what Strauss observes of him, namely that he "cannot resist the temptation to say that Socrates is a complete atheist and therewith to contradict his own indictment..." (43). Meletus believes he knows that Socrates is an atheist; all that talk about daimonic things was rhetorical obfuscation. It is, though, *willful/criminal* atheism. Socrates is not just innocent of the very idea of god. Meletus could not be infuriated with that. But then again willful atheism is not quite genuine atheism; it is rather a sort of snubbing of the gods or god by way of a denial of their or his existence. Strepsiades is a perfect example; and he, of course, is a laughable fool (Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, 133). Socrates does know,

as everyone must know, that there are gods but he mocks them by putting in their place those new daimonic things of his own invention. It is willful, artful blasphemy. The temptation that Meletus could not resist indicates the incoherence of his understanding of Socrates, and his charge against Socrates. The point is serious because it is not only Meletus who is incoherent. Athens is as well. In his refutation of Meletus Socrates indicates an incoherence in Athens' holding him criminally liable for not believing in the city's gods. The refutation is a thing of beauty and, as Strauss observes, it "is so beautiful because it leaves entirely open whether Socrates believes in the Gods of the city" (44).

Socrates has made Meletus look very stupid and has given the jury members some food for thought concerning their own piety. On a rhetorical level he has indicated that he is pious, very pious—albeit in his own way—and that his piety is not criminal and not corrupting. The case for his innocence turns squarely on this point. It now depends in turn on just what Socrates means by his reference to his new daimonic things. This Strauss shows to be the central theme of what follows Socrates' exchange with Meletus, prior to the rendering of the verdict (44–47). Socrates approaches it indirectly, in the mode of a digression. Someone might ask, he acknowledges: Is there not something rather foolish in Socrates' whole manner of life? Why can't he think whatever it pleases him to think but just keep his mouth shut? Is it not shamefully imprudent to insist on annoying others and run the risk of their retaliatory anger? In response to this Socrates draws himself up and assumes his noblest posture. Philosophizing, in his manner of doing so, is something of great benefit to the city. Elevating to heroic proportions his claim of being serviceable Socrates compares himself to Achilles. The comparison is significant in its own way. Like Achilles, Socrates suggests that he would prefer death to the dishonor of failing his pious duty. We understand that a city might sometimes require at least some of its citizens to brave death on its behalf. And yet, is a city not also potentially at risk from such persons as can defy it by refusing to cow tow to its ultimate sanction? Here the contrast between Socrates and Achilles is relevant. Achilles' passionate heart had caused him to defy his commander and he reentered lists in glorious, righteous rage. Socrates describes a more rational capacity to brave death. In this connection he does admit that there is a circumstance under which he would defy the law—but only one: If Athens were to outlaw philosophy (45). This is not an implicit admission of guilt, however. Athens had not proscribed philosophy in so many words; and Socrates does not concede that he disobeyed her laws.

Within the broad context of his apology Socrates' discussion of his service to Athens is relevant as leading to the following question: if he is so useful, should his influence not be made official? Should Socrates not go into politics

and seek to serve with political authority? After all, it does not behoove the city to depend on benefits that it cannot command. Socrates will not go into politics, though, because his daimonic voice forbids it. Through it Socrates divines that a political career would be highly dangerous for a person like himself. Indeed he can see by his own lights that the daimonic voice was right. On two occasions that he relates when he was required to perform official acts, ones he knew to be against the law, he refused and nearly paid with his life. No, politics is no career for so good a person as Socrates.

So, what can we gather concerning Socrates' daimonic voice? We note that it is not the voice of god commanding him to do his duty. In fact, it does not command him to *do* anything whatsoever but always speaks in a way that imposes restraint, telling Socrates what not to do. It was the oracle, Socrates told us, that imposed a positive duty. Strauss insists that in holding Socrates back out of apparent concern for his safety, the daimonic voice is "radically different from the Delphic Oracle" (46). True enough, and yet can this be Strauss' final word on this matter? Surely not, for a bit later he reminds us that Socrates says that "... what he does at the god's command ... came to him through oracles, dreams, and in any other manner of divine dispensation—the Delphic reply to Chairephon long ago ceased to be the single epoch-making event in his life. ..." (48). The phrase "any manner," is broadly inclusive, enough so as to take within its sweep a daimonic voice. So, what Strauss appears to be suggesting is that the radical opposition between the daimonic voice and the Oracle belongs to Socrates' representation of his philosophical activity as a painful and fearful duty to god, and as such intelligible within the terms of a sort of piety that most Athenians might be able to understand and credit. Towards the end of his defense speech, though, Strauss notes, Socrates admits that his philosophical activity was "not unpleasant." It was "not unpleasant not only for frivolous youths but simply: it is not unpleasant for Socrates himself" (48). In view of all this, are we led to see anything more concerning Socrates' thoughts about gods and divine matters?

At just this point in his commentary, where Strauss has trained our whole attention on the question of the meaning of the *daimonion*, he makes a highly unusual move. That is, as if to drop his guard, he writes a parenthetical "note" that "tells" what the *daimonion* is. It is beyond my powers to restate this in any other words than Strauss' own.

[Note. The most intelligible account of the *daimonion* is found in the *Theages*, a dialogue now generally regarded as spurious. (In that dialogue) Socrates has recourse to his *daimonion* after the recourse to his being *erotikos* was to no avail; his *daimonion* replaces his being *erotikos*

because it fulfills the same function—because it *is* the same. Socrates cannot profitably be together with people who are not promising, who are not attractive to him. But not a few who are not attractive to him are attracted by him. He cannot well explain his refusal to be together with them by saying that he does not ‘love’ them: he refers to a mysterious power to which everyone must bow and which cannot be asked questions; recourse to the *daimonion* is necessary only for justifying refusals (to act). The *daimonion* is the forbidding, the denying aspect of Socrates’ nature, of his natural inclinations; its full or true aspect is his *eros* as explained in the *Symposium*: *eros* is daimonic, not divine. ‘The nature of the other animals is daimonic, but not divine . . . Dreams then would be not god-sent but indeed daimonic’ (Aristotle, *De div. per somnia* 463b14.)] (47).

Socrates’ *daimonion* is, “in its true aspect,” his “being *erotikos*,” his eroticism. What, though, are we to make of this Socratic eroticism? Does Strauss mean to suggest that Socrates is genuinely erotic, or might this itself be a metaphor for something, say, more prosaic than we might take the word “erotic” to mean? If *eros* is the “true aspect” of Socrates’ natural inclinations, and Socrates is to be understood as having a natural inclination to philosophize, does this mean that Socrates’ philosophizing is an erotic activity? Or might it mean something less than that, for example that his eroticism finds its expression in his best relations with others, relations that “grace” his philosophizing? These are difficult questions, and are beyond the scope of this essay or my powers. Strauss does, though, show them to be relevant to an understanding of *The Apology of Socrates*, and beyond. Perhaps this much can be said. Strauss reads what Socrates says about his “*daimonion*” as a kind of pointer towards his “*eros*.” He recommends implicitly that we think further about whether what Socrates says about his “*eros*” points towards the divine. Reflection on *The Symposium* and a passage from Aristotle might guide us towards thinking this through.

At the conclusion of his defense against the charges, just prior to the rendering of the verdict, Socrates comments directly on the rhetorical strategy he has been employing. More specifically, he explains why he chose not to appeal to the tenderer sympathies of the jury and plead for mercy, even though he knows it is likely that that such an appeal would have enhanced his chances for an acquittal. He had two sorts of reasons. In the first place, he was concerned about reputation, both his own and that of Athens. He is reputed to be a wise person and a lover of wisdom, whatever that might mean in the minds of those who hold such an opinion, and he does not want it thought that such a person as he is reputed to be would behave disgracefully. It would

be disgraceful, though, to beg the jury to decide his case on any other basis than that of justice. He is innocent, and the honorable course is for him to try to persuade the jury of that truth. Secondly, Socrates has a concern for Athens' reputation—as a city that is devoted to justice. Athens would be exercising a tyrannical prerogative in granting mercy to someone she believes guilty of this capital offense and she should resist any such temptation on her honor. There is also another consideration besides that of concern for anyone's reputation and that connects more directly with the issue of the essential truth of the matter. In its most general formulation, Socrates is accused of acting unjustly and being unjust. Those who bring that charge are Socrates' enemies. It is not true. To this very day Socrates has not acted in a way that would make him an unjust person and he is not about to betray himself to his enemies by vindicating their charge. Not on this day.

All this is to say that Socrates' rhetoric has been governed by prudence, albeit a prudence of a very high order. He may have had some hope to win his case. There would be those who vote for his acquittal and we have no reason to think that on some other happier day such might be in the majority. Of such persons Strauss comments, "We may conclude tentatively that those who voted to acquit Socrates believed either in his Delphic mission or in the intrinsic supremacy of the philosophical life or perhaps both" (50). This is significant, for the prospect of such friends of Socrates coming to exercise a moral authority that would be more accommodating to such as Socrates is part of what we might call the cost/benefit analysis that explains why Socrates spoke as he did at his trial. He does not speak in such a way as to maximize his chances for acquittal because he does not want such a victory to cost more than he would stand to gain. He might gain a few more years of life—quite few. The loss would be to his city, and most especially those in the city who are, in several senses of the word, his friends. Socrates' behavior at his trial is unintelligible if no account is taken of his affection for his city and his friends.

So long as the verdict is in doubt, or at least not yet pronounced, Socrates defends himself as best he can, "best" given all of the pertinent circumstances. Once he has been pronounced guilty, however, the circumstances are changed. Now the operative question is that of the penalty. In this part of the dialogue, its central section, Socrates speaks in a way that courts the penalty of death. The alternatives were exile or a fine. However, Socrates dismisses exile with the remark that any place to which he might be exiled would likely find him even more annoying and dangerous than did his fellow Athenians. As for the fine, while it is true, as Strauss notes, that the prospects for even a steep fine might be paid by several persons from the Socratic circle, Socrates treats of this in a

way that practically ensures that the jury would not accept it. That is, he first insists that he, himself, could not pay any fine however small, on account of his poverty. He *then* observes several friends who are present and whom he names, to be willing to pay on his behalf. It is as if to say: Very well, fine me. These friends of mine will pay it. Thus, he refuses to consider seriously any penalty other than death, like a fine for instance, even though as Strauss notes the prospect that even a steep fine might be paid by several from the Socratic circle was always available (p. 51).

Most importantly, Socrates is now much more uncompromising with regard to the gap between those who are truly competent to judge him, as versus everybody else. He delivers himself of what has become perhaps the most famous statement recounted in the entire Platonic corpus.

... on the other hand, if I say that this even happens to be a very great good for a human being—to make speeches every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me conversing and examining both myself and others—and that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being, you will be persuaded by me still less when I say these things. This is the way it is, as I affirm, but to persuade you is not easy. (38a)

With these words Socrates explains, if anyone ever doubted it, that his earlier characterization of his philosophic activity as a fearful and painful mission, imposed upon him by Apollo's Oracle, was a rhetorical metaphor. He drops it now and speaks with full, bald candor. Still even this candor has a powerful rhetorical effect, like that of a spit in the eye. Athens has attempted to judge Socrates but Socrates has judged Athens. Athens must now bear the sting of that judgment; and this too is an element of Socrates' whole rhetorical strategy.

Leo Strauss' "recovery," as it has been called, of Plato's philosophy and political philosophy involves his rediscovery of the full import and timeless relevance of Socrates' explanation of his rhetoric. The gap between philosophers, like himself, and non-philosophers however well-disposed is unbridgeable. The city of men must be judged accordingly. It is a "cave," and it cannot be transformed by any popular enlightenment. What fundamentally causes the writings of Leo Strauss to be so controversial, even troublesome, today, is that those writings indicate his agreement with what Plato teaches about the nature of political life and what he indicates about the nature of philosophy. How one judges this issue will of course depend on one's perspective, deriving as it must from one's experience, or lack thereof, of the relevant matter.

Upon the sentence being pronounced, Socrates makes a final speech, of valediction. In this speech the distinction between those who voted for Socrates' conviction and those who would have acquitted him is brought to the fore, for Socrates addresses each camp separately. He speaks first to those who voted to convict. What they have done, he claims, will come back to haunt them. His own voice would have been silenced rather soon in any case, for Socrates' natural death would not have been far off. This death, though, will be avenged. Those who had reason to be annoyed with Socrates are unaware of how much they actually owe him for having held his youthful followers back from having been even more aggressively hostile. Now they are likely to come forth. We are naturally inclined to think of Plato himself as an avenger. By the power of his art Athens would come to be known as far as the story might reach as having been the city that killed Socrates. Socrates, however, appears to bear this part of the city no ill will. Perhaps he sees that this part, in this case the majority, is necessary to the well-being of the city; or perhaps that its members are at least irremovable by any permissible measures. That something like this might be the case is indicated by the fact that in his final speech Socrates turns back to those who voted for conviction and charges them with the responsibility of raising his sons (41e). Assuming that he cares for the well being of his sons, he must think that it would be better for them to be raised by the sort of persons whose care for justice dictates punitive justice. Socrates' would-be acquitters would be too soft.

To those would-be acquitters Socrates addresses some words of consolation. He is to die; but should we think death to be such a terrible thing—might it not even be a blessing? Here, as with respect to Socrates' reference to the Delphic Oracle, we have reason to guess that Socrates is not speaking what he understands as the literal truth. As Strauss notes, in Socrates' *final* sentence he says that he doesn't know whether death is better or worse than to go on living (54). Also, here as before it is hard to know to just what degree his audience believed what Socrates says to console them. It's likely that what he says is comforting to a certain degree because it is spoken in an amazingly calm, collected voice. Even in reading it *we* are moved. Socrates is just himself and he will be right up to the end. He faces death with a fearlessness that is beyond the noblest courage.

What Socrates says to his would-be acquitters is that death must be seen as one of two things. Either it is like a sleep in which one perceives nothing—and who would not enjoy a peaceful dreamless sleep?—or it is a kind of journey to another place, and in that place one could converse with others who have also passed on. With regard to this latter prospect, Socrates says that death would surely be a great boon. He will still be Socrates, spending all his time

talking with others, and now they won't be able to kill him for it! Strauss notes that these posthumous conversations will not be exactly like the ones Socrates engaged while alive. This is as it would have to be. He would be telling and swapping stories with lots of persons, some of whom were illustrious and not Athenians, and there would be no urgency whatsoever hanging over them. In other words, Socrates does not think of such an existence as the culmination, and hence cessation, of his earthly philosophizing but rather as something like a dessert that follows the meal.

In these valedictory speeches about death Socrates provides a sort of articulate structure to the vague and confused hope that it is probably natural for us to feel. We hope to "go to a better place," where we may "rest in peace." Precisely as he does *articulate* that hope, however, Socrates guides those who hear him towards greater consciousness of the confusion that lies within it. We hope to rest in peace; but does that mean we desire eternal oblivion? Socrates' comparison of death to "sleep" is a kind of verbal silence on the prospect of death as oblivion, as well as a silence on its being a fact of nature. Therefore we are given to wonder, how is it for Socrates himself? Is he free of the need for any such consolations as he grants to his would-be acquitters? How might that be possible? One might say that Socrates *knows* that death is according to nature. Is that knowledge, though, sufficient to explain how Socrates confronted his death? Might not one still hate or fear a certitude? Must one attribute to Socrates a sort of raw courage that enables him to brave out what is, for him as for everyone, an evil? Conversely, might Socrates have thought the matter through so as to see that death is not evil, or at least not *the* evil that most men fear? Is Socrates' cool courage in fact an amazing freedom from a certain presumption? Such a speculation would lead one to think that there is an intimate connection between the wonder-inducing manner with which Socrates faced death and the enigma of his statement that the unexamined life is not worth living.

Strauss follows his commentary on the *Apology of Socrates* with a commentary on the *Crito*. Although the commentary on the *Crito* is shorter, it is not shorter by as much as Plato's *Crito* is shorter than his *Apology of Socrates*. That is to say, Strauss is even more attentive to the *Crito's* particular details. Why is this so? The answer is indicated by what Strauss tells us in the very concluding paragraph of the commentary. He means to assess and respond to the charge leveled by the philosopher Hobbes that Socrates and his followers were anarchists. This impression is all too likely if our reading were confined only to the *Apology of Socrates*. Strauss had shown that Socrates had argued that he is a good and useful citizen. His having annoyed others derived from his pious

service to “the god” and that service is entirely compatible with his performance of his civic duties and his benevolent services. However, we also saw that Socrates’ defense involved a sort of counter accusation against the city. If Meletus is a spokesman for the city’s demands, his confusions are significant insofar as they reflect an incoherence in the city that runs very deep. Strauss forces us to confront with full seriousness the issue of Socrates’ guilt or innocence and upon confronting it we must conclude that if Socrates was innocent he was so on his own terms. What is more, those terms are all but unintelligible to all but a very few.

Can this be sufficient? Is this innocence? Strauss shows that Socrates almost confesses that he does not believe in the gods of the city as the city believes in them or claims to believe in them (43, 44, 46). At best, Socrates “believes in” something else that substitutes. By this very token, is he not guilty of being contemptuous, publicly contemptuous, of the laws that may command such belief and whose sanctity may depend upon such belief? In short, the question that provokes Hobbes is whether even the most charitable and sophisticated reading, Strauss’ sort of reading, of Socrates’ apology does not show him to be putting himself above the law. To this Strauss responds that Hobbes’ charge is an “exaggeration,” but one that does contain an “underlying” truth (66). Strauss turns to the *Crito* so as to reveal that truth while also to show, more importantly, the way to resist the exaggeration.

Strauss describes the scene of the *Crito*, noting how different it is from the previous dialogue. Here Socrates is engaged in a very private, even secret, conversation. It is very early morning, still dark. Socrates’ “oldest friend,” Crito, has come to the prison chamber where Socrates is being held for his execution. Crito intends to urge his friend to escape. He is certain that there are those like himself in Athens who are ready, willing, and able to make that happen. Socrates, however, is still asleep when Crito comes to him and out of consideration for his friend’s peace of mind, Crito hesitates to wake him. Upon waking, Socrates will chide Crito for that hesitation, although it did have the effect of saving a pleasant dream. In that dream a beautiful and well-shaped woman was telling Socrates that on the third day [he] would come to most fertile Phthia. On the basis of the dream Socrates disagrees with a report from Crito indicating that Socrates will die “tomorrow.” Strauss notes that the dream is ambiguous. The words of the beautiful woman derive from a Homeric context which might indicate that Socrates will enter Hades in three, not two, days. Alternatively, if removed from their Homeric context, the words might mean that Socrates will in three days find himself safe and sound in Thessaly, where the province of Phthia is located. Strauss writes wryly that Socrates tacitly chooses the former interpretation “as a matter of course” (55).

The remainder of the commentary follows a division of the dialogue into two main parts. In the first, Socrates and Crito exchange a series of arguments whereby Socrates prepares Crito for what is about to happen. In the second, Crito listens as Socrates recites arguments that he has heard as if from the voice of “the Laws” themselves, arguments that put Socrates into a kind of Korybantic frenzy. We presume that Crito too will be at least vicariously moved.

Crito begins his appeal to Socrates as his friend. He is of course aware that Socrates is beyond any fear of death, so he asks that Socrates consider the loss to himself, if Socrates submits to the death penalty. Crito will lose his dear friend. Not only that, but Crito will also suffer ill repute for having failed to save his friend when it was obviously within his power to do so. Socrates rejoins that it would be wrong to put so much stock in what many people are likely to presume. Crito then shifts his ground. Rather than argue that Socrates is insufficiently concerned with Crito’s welfare, he argues as if Socrates might be too much concerned with it. He encourages Socrates not to be worried that the costs, bribes and so on, of spiriting Socrates to safety would put a strain on his wealth. Crito has plenty of money; and besides, there are several others who would be willing to contribute. These arguments, which concern Crito’s welfare, however, do not go to the heart of what Crito is feeling, intensely and urgently. Nor could they be expected to change Socrates’ mind. His real point concerns the morality of the issue. Crito urges that Socrates consider his duty to his children. One may choose not to have children; but if one does have them, justice requires that one be responsible for their upbringing. Crito is perhaps genuinely perplexed that Socrates, of all people, should be so oblivious of these elementary demands of justice. The moral thrust of Crito’s argument, however, is broader than this. Strauss at this point makes a comment that illustrates his amazingly insightful reading of the words being spoken. Crito is convinced that it is ignoble for a man to accept defeat in a cause that is in fact just. A man’s duty—his first duty—is to preserve himself so as to fight on and not give a hated enemy satisfaction.

Let us try to state more directly what we have learned about the character of Crito, thanks to Strauss’ stress on the psychological dimension of the exchange. Crito is an old friend. He is highly respectful of Socrates and his “views” even though he doesn’t fully understand them, not on this occasion at least. Were he to address Socrates as someone more his equal he might speak as follows, “Socrates—for god’s sake! Why should you submit yourself to the judgment of that kangaroo court that has just proved itself incapable of judging such as you fairly? This whole affair has been a disgusting, low comedy and you are being obstinately foolish to treat it with respect, at such a cost

to yourself and to your friends! Treat that jury with the contempt it deserves. Deny their power; if there is a shred of decency in any of them they might be inflicted with the self-contempt that justice actually demands." To a man with such feelings it is not surprising that Socrates makes no reference to his *daimonion* as forbidding his escape. Crito would doubtless hear such a reference impatiently, sure that Socrates' *daimonion* talk was just so much rhetoric with which he fobs off the rabble. Between enlightened friends, there is no need of it (57).

Crito is both contemptuous of the many, whose members are blind to Socrates' rare virtue, and incensed that this same many should presume to judge Socrates as guilty. To respond effectively, Socrates will need to elevate Crito's contempt, to make it more genuine, as if to say, "Crito, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Socrates does this by appealing to what he and his old friend have always held, namely, that one ought not put stock in what the many might believe but rather in what is required by reasonable speech. Surely now, as Socrates' life is about to draw to its conclusion, his old friend would not ask that he abandon the very grounds of what has made them dear to one another. If Crito agrees to that, then he must also agree that in the instance at hand we should be bravely ready to follow the advice of one who knows—an expert—and not pay attention to the ignoramuses.

It is not at all difficult to see that Socrates' argument is not cogent. But rather than being content to criticize it, we have to be interested in what makes it appealing to Crito; and we have done that in the forgoing remarks about Crito's psychology. The argument itself—for we need to be specific about its shortcomings—can be seen as begging a question. That is, *is* there an expert in matters of right and wrong? For if there were no such expertise, a stronger case would exist for adherence to being ruled by the authoritative opinions that claim to be sufficient to govern everybody, irrespective of distinction—i.e. the Laws. If there were an expertise of the sort that Socrates refers to it would either consist in or be informed by a knowledge of the soul and its needs. Socrates, however, studiously avoids mentioning the term "soul" in this context and in fact throughout the *Crito* (58). Herein, incidentally, is one strikingly valuable instance of Strauss' way of reading Platonic dialogues as conveying their message through the movement of what transpires on the level of psychology. This quite naturally permits him to call attention to words or thoughts that are abstracted from. Silence too can be meaningful. Critics of Strauss who refuse to be guided by what he occasionally observes a Platonic character *not* to say ought to stand ready to argue the irrelevance of what Strauss argues is relevant yet not mentioned. In the case at hand, we do see on the surface that Socrates mentions the "expert" as someone whose authority we ought to trust

and almost immediately drops that reference. If *we* were to pursue this matter our very next step would have to be to ask: "Expert in *what*, exactly?" Every conversation operates within limits. The abstraction from the forgoing question marks the limits within which the *Crito* operates.

Socrates' next step is to appeal to some further propositions about which he and Crito have always agreed. In the first place, they have agreed that it is not life as such that is to be valued most highly but rather the good life, which is to say the noble and just life. Furthermore, they have agreed that this notion of nobility and justice entails the conviction that it is always wrong to inflict evil on another, even in retaliation for an evil being done towards oneself. "Many" might hold it just to requite evil for evil, but Socrates and Crito hold the contrary. From here one more step is necessary; Socrates asks Crito to imagine how he might respond if the Laws, Athens' Laws, were to have voice and demand that he explain to them how for Socrates to run away from the sentence would not be to return evil for evil. We have to note that neither here nor elsewhere do the Laws deny that Socrates was wrongly convicted. We note too that the Laws have an easier time persuading Crito than they would otherwise insofar as they have been given soul and voice, such that they *could* suffer as an ensouled being might suffer. This is, of course, not true. It is Socrates who is talking, and Crito knows that. However, through an appeal to their long standing friendship and what Crito accepts as the ground and meaning of that friendship Socrates has won the right to speak as something like an oracle. Crito might not have much respect for either the many or religion; yet he listens in a reverential silence to what "the Laws" are about to say.

The Laws argue that it is right and just for Socrates to stay and suffer the death penalty. They advance two grounds. The first of these is that it was by their power that Socrates' mother and father generated him (!) and therefore they are his true father. One owes obedience to one's father. To be sure, one might think, and think correctly, that the Laws have treated him unjustly but the Laws say that in such a case one ought to try to persuade them. However, if one fails to persuade, one must nevertheless submit. The Laws are amenable to reason. They seek to be reasonable, as we might say in this context, but their being reasonable in every particular instance of their application cannot be the definitive condition for their authority.

Next, the Laws remind Socrates of his implicit agreement with them to grant their authority. Strauss underscores the difference between these two arguments. The former "... makes him a slave of the Laws, the latter is the act of a free man; unqualified obedience to the Laws has its root in the co-operation of compulsion and consent" (63). The Law's authority requires "both" of these two defenses; neither of them standing alone would be sufficient.

One might, after all, resist compulsion if it were merely that. Strauss mentions the circumstance of one's having an insane father as a case in point. On the other hand, mere consent might sometimes rationally be withheld. Everyone who is familiar with more recent attempts to ground political authority in a "contract" will be aware of this issue. Strauss does not say explicitly—he leaves it for us to see—that combining two arguments does not necessarily answer to the deficiencies of either or both of them.

Did Socrates in fact agree to obey the Laws, as they claim? Here we might remind ourselves that, at his trial, Socrates did say that if Athens were to enact a law against philosophy he would not obey it. The Laws say that Socrates' agreement to obey is implicit in the fact that he almost never left Athens, not even for Sparta or Crete, whose laws he often praised. Indeed Socrates is exemplary in this respect. Probably more than is the case for any other Athenian, Socrates showed through his behavior his whole life long that he was pleased to accept the authority of Athens' Laws. It was his deliberate choice. Strauss calls attention to the problem with this argument by noting that "... a city may have other attractions than its laws ... (One finds an extensive statement of Socrates' view of Athens' attractions and of her laws in his description of democracy in the eighth book of the *Republic*.)" (64).

The Laws next proceed to a different sort of argument. They urge Socrates to consider that he can gain no real advantage in escaping. Where might he go? Were he to flee to a nearby city, its inhabitants would doubtless have heard of him and of the circumstances of his flight. He would come as a lawbreaker; and how could he even attempt to continue his activity of examining himself and others with regard to virtue and the question of the right way of life when he would have shown through his cowardly deed that he cared more for his life than for righteousness? He would be a joke. On the other hand, were he to escape to some barbaric land where he might come as a perfect stranger, under this circumstance too his philosophical activity would be impossible. His sort of philosophizing is at home only among the civilized. Strauss' observation on this point is obvious enough. The disjunction is not complete. Why might Socrates not escape to a place that was far enough away that his late circumstances would be unknown and yet that place be civilized? We have only to think of Crete as an example (65). We might guess that Crito does not consider such a prospect seriously since he is a provincial sort of man. For him, as one gets further away from Athens, one descends further into barbarism.

As one final indication of how seductive is the rhetorical device that Socrates employs with Crito, we might note that in one significant respect what the Laws are made to say involves a shift of grounds, right near the end. Throughout

most of their speech, Strauss notes, the Laws take "... full responsibility for everything done by their authority." That is, in order to exonerate themselves they are careful not to accuse the people of Athens of the injustice done to Socrates. "The Laws are the city, the citizen body, the Athenians... There is a twofold reason for this. Firstly, the Laws act only through being known to human beings, ... they act only through human beings and, above all, they originate in human beings or, more precisely, in the regime which in Athens is a democracy. Secondly, acting unjustly means inflicting evil on human beings; but the Laws are not human beings" (63). We understand: It is a necessary corollary of the Laws' being given voice and soul that they take full responsibility for what is done in their name. However, in their conclusion, the Laws "... now disclaim responsibility for the injustice which Socrates suffered; he has suffered that injustice at the hands not of the Laws but of human beings." (65) And this too is necessary, with regard to their final admonition to Socrates. When Socrates comes to Hades, the Laws say, he can plead his defense before the laws of Hades. Those Laws, who are the actual rulers of Hades, cannot commit an injustice. This is to say that the Laws who have been speaking *now* distinguish themselves from the human beings who made them so as to appeal to their kindredness to the more than human Laws, the divine Laws, that govern our final reward or punishment in the afterlife. Without this reference, the majesty of the Laws would, in time, dissolve.

We have reached the point where it is possible to state how Strauss responds to Hobbes' charge that Socrates and his followers were anarchists. The germ of truth in that charge is that Socrates does not actually think that absolute obedience to the law is always rational, not even on the proviso that one might have the opportunity to try and persuade the laws when they might have sanctioned an injustice. With regard to the case at hand, the option of Socrates' escaping is not actually precluded by anything that the laws say. Strauss' careful review as to why Socrates avails himself of the rhetorical device of making the laws speak, and his critique of the arguments that the laws employ, all go together to explain why Socrates, *under these particular circumstances*, would choose to remain and face the death penalty. He is already fairly old. He braves with an amazing calm the knowledge that he would have but a few years to live even if Athens had not decreed his death. There is a genuine danger to Crito and others if Socrates were to accept Crito's plan. Crito might underestimate that danger as a consequence of his general contempt for the many. More importantly, Socrates is in a position to employ his death by making himself something of a martyr for the cause of philosophy, understood as righteous and

law-abiding to the very end, and hence not guilty of the charge of corrupting the youth. Crito will carry that message from this chamber to the end of his days (66).

If this conclusion is warranted we are naturally inclined to wonder: What if the circumstances had been different? For example, suppose Socrates had been considerably younger. Or, to make the point even more startlingly, suppose that even at his present age, Socrates had been presented with an escape plan by persons not constrained by Crito's provincial and other related limitations. If he could have been spirited away, with almost no one's being the wiser, might he have been? *Was* he, perhaps? (For who, in Plato's *Laws*, could that "Athenian Stranger" be, other than Socrates?) This is a suggestion that must be delicious to all of Plato's readers who are won over to Socrates. It is also, of course, irrelevant to our understanding of the message of the dialogue. Strauss puts the seal on the matter with the following, slightly teasing remark, "But, as the *Laws and Socrates* (43b10–11) say, he is an old man who is not likely to live for a long time anyway. The *Laws* have no reason to discuss whether another course of action would have been appropriate had Socrates been younger" (65, my emphasis).

Strauss concludes his essay on *Crito* by responding to Hobbes' charge as follows. The charge that Socrates and his followers were anarchists is a "grave exaggeration" of an underlying truth. Socrates did not think that there is an unqualified duty to obey the laws but he did think that the demand for such obedience is a "wise rule of thumb" as distinguished from an unqualified duty. Is this, though, not tantamount to admitting that Hobbes was fundamentally right? That Socrates and his followers were closet anarchists who secretly denied the duty that the laws demand and must demand? And is Strauss himself also guilty of that same crime—as one of Socrates' followers? Is he perhaps even more guilty, insofar as he exposes to the light what Plato's subtle dramatic writing had kept hidden from all but a few (like Hobbes)? This is a serious question for us today. The response to it goes beyond how we judge Leo Strauss and entails ultimately our judgment of our own times and our duty in our times. Strauss shows us that Socrates' defense of his philosophizing before the Athenian jury entails a critique of the city and its laws. Our vicarious participation in the dialogue brings us to see the sophistries—the lies—of the city and its laws. We need to reflect on the actual effect of that recognition on ourselves. Does Socrates' philosophizing instill an enmity between ourselves and our city or, rather, does it nourish a motive for rescuing the city, saving it from the generic defect which we have been brought to understand in a very clear and comprehensive way? The latter does appear actually to be the case. The

reason for this is that our being together with Socrates entails that we know him to be a “political animal,” no less than any other human being. It is obvious that the city provides the conditions for his safety and his sustenance; would Socrates not likely feel some of the affection that nature causes us to feel for whatever gives us strength? It is not, however, only a matter of material/animal requirements. The city provides Socrates the idiom within which he conducts his examination of himself and others. Among these others there may be some friends who are with Socrates as both participants and objects of the continual questioning and self-questioning. Athens is Socrates’ home, a fact that is complicated but not repudiated by the corresponding fact that Socrates is never entirely at home. His relationship to his city, and to its laws, is an enlargement of his relationship to his very self.

Does Strauss’ reading of the *Apology of Socrates* and *Crito* indicate whether Socrates was innocent or guilty of the charges for which Athens found him guilty? Perhaps the best answer is that, knowing what he knew, he was as little guilty as anyone could possibly be under the same circumstances. He was *least* guilty. To understand this rightly one would also understand, along with Socrates’ followers, that those who can be of the greatest benefit to the city cannot be those who are most selflessly and unquestionably devoted to it. This is a strange sounding statement today. But only if the city could be completely freed of its generic defect (pp. 407–08, *supra*), liberated from its limitations and confusions, would this strange sounding statement not be true.

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The Argument and the Action of Plato's *Laws*

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Leo Strauss waited until late in his life to write a book that focuses exclusively on one of Plato's dialogues. He does not elaborate why he chose to write that book about the *Laws* rather than about another dialogue, but he does shed some light on the matter through the epigram that appears at the start of the untitled preface. Taken from Avicenna's *Division of the Rational Sciences*, it reads "the treatment of prophecy and divine law is contained in . . . Plato's *Laws*." This epigram says more than that the *Laws*' theme is revelation and revealed law, for it claims that Plato wrote *the* treatment, the only treatment needed, of prophecy and divine law. It suggests that the *Laws* comprehends what prophecy and divine law are, what they aim to accomplish, and how we come to recognize and believe in them. Because Plato is not said to possess prophetic gifts or to practice mantic arts, it calls into question the claim that prophecy and divine law are known only through miracles, when a god selects a prophet or a lawgiver and conveys to him some wisdom that cannot be discovered by reason alone. What is more, the epigram suggests that the definitive treatment of divine revelation and law was written by a pagan philosopher who did not need to encounter either the Biblical or Koranic traditions in order to know what prophecy and divine law are, as if there is nothing fundamentally new or uncanny about the biblical or Koranic God's revelation or about the traditions that worship Him. By drawing our attention to Avicenna's claim that the *Laws* is the definitive treatment of prophecy and divine law, Strauss reminds us of what he calls the "theologico-political problem," which is the question whether we should be guided primarily by religious faith and law or whether we should take our bearings solely by philosophic reason and experience. As Strauss says in *Natural Right and History*, "No alternative is more fundamental than this: human guidance or divine guidance" (Strauss 1953, 74). In the preface to the German edition of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, he says that the theologico-political problem has been the underlying theme of all his work (Strauss 1965, 3, 8). Bearing in mind all that is implied by the epigram, it is not surprising that Strauss should give great attention to the *Laws*.

1 The Preface

Because the *Argument and Action of Plato's Laws* can appear to be a paraphrase of the dialogue, it requires some attention to sort out what Strauss says in his own name from his summaries of the dialogue. To get a better understanding of what concerns Strauss in the book, it is useful to consider the preface carefully, since it does not paraphrase the dialogue but addresses topics and questions that Strauss wants us to bear in mind as we read on.

Instead of following up the epigram by discussing the theologico-political problem, Strauss begins by observing that in the traditional order of the dialogues the *Laws* is preceded by the *Minos*. He says that the *Minos* is distinctive because it is the only Platonic dialogue in which Socrates asks the question "what is law?" He does not summarize how the *Minos* answers this question, but his remark that the *Minos* concludes that not all laws are equally good suggests that it points to a standard for evaluating law. He also reports that the *Minos* leads us to believe that the laws of Crete are the best because they were established by Minos, the son and pupil of Zeus. When Strauss says that it is "the quest for the best laws" that "seems to compel" the Athenians to transcend the laws of Athens and to become pupils of Minos (1), he invites the reader to conclude that in the *Laws* the Athenian stranger also goes to Crete in a quest for the best laws.

When Strauss turns to the *Laws*, he says that it is Plato's "most political" work and that "it may be said to be his only political work." He indicates something of what he means by "political" by saying that the Athenian Stranger engages in political activity when he elaborates a code of law for a city that will come into being while the *Republic* shows Socrates founding a city "in speech" rather than one "in deed." He adds that Socrates founds a city in speech not to present the best political order but to illuminate "the limits" or "the nature of politics" (1). Some might conclude from this that he calls the *Laws* a "merely" political work because it gives practical advice for actual politics and does not lay bare fundamental truths about politics. If Plato wrote the *Laws* solely to give practical political advice, then this might explain why Socrates is absent from it, for he might be too busy studying the natures of things to discuss how to establish and maintain an actual city. But if Strauss thinks that Plato wrote the *Laws* with this sole aim, then it is difficult to say how it could also be the definitive treatment of prophecy and divine law, for we would expect such a treatment to reveal not merely how religion can be used for practical, political purposes but also what prophecy and divine law are, what they seek, and how they are known.

Having quietly raised the question why Socrates is absent from the *Laws*, Strauss suggests an answer by mentioning that Socrates says in the *Apology* that he is prevented from engaging in politics by the daimonic voice. Socrates explains that this protective voice keeps him out of politics because it is too dangerous for a man who is devoted to the truth and to justice (*Apology* 31c3–32a3). But if this voice keeps him out of politics, then we cannot attribute Socrates' absence from the *Laws* to his indifference to its subject matter any more than to the dialogue's location in Crete.

The third paragraph begins by suggesting that Socrates and the Athenian are not as different as may first appear. After pointing out that Aristotle refers to the Athenian as Socrates, Strauss says that the *Laws* shows us what Socrates would have said and done had he chosen to escape execution and gone to Crete. Socrates' absence from the *Laws* could be explained by the fact that he was too old to flee to Crete after his conviction (2; also Strauss 1957, 33).

The fourth paragraph says abruptly that the *Laws* is similar to the *Phaedrus* because they both take place outside of Athens. Strauss says that "the peculiar theme of the *Phaedrus* may be said to be writings. The laws proposed in the *Laws* are written" (2). Wondering whether what may be said to be the *Phaedrus*' peculiar theme is also its deepest or its genuine theme, we note that Strauss refers to the *Phaedrus* again later, in the chapter on Book Nine, where he alludes to Socrates' claim that just as an artful doctor gives his different patients different treatments, according to their natures, so an artful writer should adapt what he writes to the nature of each reader (128; *Phaedrus* 270b1–e4). Since writers broadcast what they write to everyone, it seems impossible for them to comply with this advice. But Strauss suggests in *The City and Man* that Plato's dialogues overcome this difficulty by saying different things to different kinds of readers (1964, 53–54). The allusion to the *Phaedrus* in the preface suggests that the *Laws* is especially adept at addressing different kinds of readers in different ways.

Strauss says in the preface's final paragraph that the *Laws* is Plato's most pious work without identifying what makes it most pious and without explaining if there is any connection between its political character and its surpassing piety. He does, however, point out that the first word of the *Laws* is "god" and that this is the same word that ends the *Apology* (3). This suggests that the *Laws* begins where the *Apology* ends and thus that the *Laws* addresses the manifest conflict between philosophy and the gods of the city. Strauss ends the preface by indicating that the Athenian finds a way to mitigate or overcome this conflict as he says that the Athenian proposes a law against impiety that would be more favorable to Socrates than was the corresponding law in Athens.

The preface leaves us with a number of questions. Why is Plato's treatment of prophecy and divine law also his most political or his only political dialogue? Does its political character mean that it is less theoretically rich than other dialogues? What is the connection between its political character and its piety? Does its piety suggest that it is less revealing, or more revealing, than other dialogues? Precisely how does the Athenian differ from Socrates, and how does the *Laws* as a whole continue what Socrates undertakes in the *Apology*? To answer these questions, we will consider what Strauss goes on to say about the difference between how in the *Republic* Socrates founds a city in speech and how in the *Laws* the Athenian founds one in deed.

2 The Athenian as Legislator

Strauss first mentions a difference between the *Republic* and the *Laws* in the chapter on Book One, where he discusses the Athenian's endorsement of symposia. When the Athenian refers to the perfect symposium as the "symposium itself," Strauss says that the Athenian seems to be speaking of the "idea of the symposium." But Strauss says that we know from the *Republic* that the perfect symposium must be a utopia rather than an idea, since there cannot be an idea of anything that is man-made. Pointing out that the *Laws* obscures the difference between an idea and a utopia, he concludes that "this difference between the *Laws* and the *Republic* corresponds to the difference between Kleinias-Megillos and Glaukon-Adeimantos, between the manifest absence and the manifest presence of philosophy" (14). This suggests that the dialogue is emphatically political because it does not rise to the level of philosophy. Like the first chapter, the second chapter links the absence of philosophy to the presence of Kleinias and Megillus. He says that the difference between the *Republic* and the *Laws* can be traced to the "difference in degree of *parrhesia* characteristic of the Athenians on the one hand and the Dorians on the other, or to the sub-Socratic character of the conversations that take place in the *Laws*" (27). Later, Strauss indicates how *parrhesia* ("speaking freely") can contribute to a conversation by linking the *parrhesia* that is induced by wine to an unwillingness to listen to traditional stories (36). The Athenian cannot pursue the questions that Socrates raises in other dialogues because he converses with men who are not sufficiently open in speech or in thought (cf. 59). In the chapter on Book Seven, Strauss explains that the political man takes human affairs seriously while the philosopher does not (106). In this sense, the *Laws* would be the most political dialogue because it takes human affairs with the

utmost seriousness and disregards what concerns the philosopher as philosopher. Strauss does not discuss why the Athenian chooses to talk with such men about divine law in the first place. It cannot be because he wants to legislate for an actual city, since he does not know until the end of Book 3 that one of them has been charged with helping to found one.

Later in the second chapter, Strauss repeats that the difference between the *Laws* and the *Republic* corresponds to “the manifest difference between Kleinias-Megillos and Glaukon-Adeimantus, the manifest difference between the absence and the manifest presence of philosophy.” But this time he adds that “philosophy as philosophy, in its nakedness, would be out of place in the *Laws* (at any rate in the beginning)” (35). This addition suggests that philosophy can find a place in the dialogue if it wears some clothing. Once decently covered, philosophy not only plays a role in the dialogue but also, eventually, disrobes. Two pages later, Strauss says that in the *Republic*,

reason or intellect guides the foundation of the city from the beginning, and eventually rules the city in broad daylight without any dilution or disguise. Such a city is something to be prayed or wished for rather than something which can arouse the spontaneous and passionate concern of experienced political men. Accordingly, the Athenian stranger deals with the city very differently than does Socrates conversing with Glaukon and Adeimantos. (37)

In the *Republic*, reason or intellect rules the city in broad daylight when Socrates openly advocates the rule of philosopher kings. Strauss says here that Socrates knows that his proposals can only be prayed or wished for since they will not be acceptable to men who are experienced in politics. He also suggests that philosophy is not absent from any part of the *Laws* but is diluted or hidden because the Athenian wants experienced political men to support his proposals spontaneously and passionately.

It is not difficult to see why Strauss says that the Athenian sometimes limits his rational argument in the dialogue (e.g. 17, 28–31, 52, 114, 132). What may be less clear is why the Athenian needs to disguise philosophy to win fervent support from experienced political men. We readily understand that experienced political men would reject Socratic proposals that would abolish institutions that such men cherish. But if philosophers can use the “political art” and adjust what they say to fit the needs and capacities of those with whom they are speaking (21, 180), then a philosopher could propose modest innovations that might be adopted. We might suppose that the Athenian conceals philosophy because it suffers from a very dubious reputation (e.g. *Apology* 23d–e; *Laws* 967c–d; *Republic* 487c–d, 607), but Strauss points out that Kleinias and other

Dorians are completely unfamiliar with philosophy and oblivious of its notoriety (128). This means that the Athenian could tell them that he is a philosopher who quests after the best laws, and so he has come to Crete to learn about laws that are most divine. After all, if Socrates is willing to tell his jury that he serves Apollo by examining others and that "the god" requires him to philosophize in Athens (*Apology* 22a, 23b, 33c), what prevents the Athenian from saying from the start that he is a philosopher who serves Apollo, Zeus, or some other god by examining and commenting on divine law? He could introduce philosophy to the Dorians as something that is probing but nonetheless respectful and useful for coming to know the goals and principles of divine law. But if the Athenian's goal were simply to show how philosophy should cover itself to preserve itself in actual cities, it is surprising that he waits until Book Nine to mention its name and until the very end to say expressly that it supports piety and law (128; *Laws* 967d). In the chapter on Book Five, Strauss says that Plato's silence about philosophy is a "law that he imposes on himself" and that he only occasionally and surreptitiously transgresses that law (75). Insofar as Plato imposes this law on himself, he does not adopt it because external necessities, such as the threat of persecution, force him to do so. If he truly imposes the law on himself, then he does so for a purpose that is his own.

In order to shed some light on why the Athenian conceals philosophy in the *Laws*, it helps to consider what he says about the guise that it wears. In the chapter on Book Four, Strauss remarks that "in the sub-Socratic context of the *Laws*," the only wise men are the legislators and the poets (61). According to tradition, these authorities derive their wisdom from the gods (1, 25, 35, 41, 61). Thus, when the Athenian presents himself as a legislator or as a teacher of legislators (14, 16–17, 42, 49, 58), he appears to his interlocutors as a prophetic interpreter and as a diviner of revealed law (11, 16, 49, 149). He sets out on the path that Minos took to the cave of Zeus, and he pursues that path until he arrives at the origin of all law or at "the god" (4, 8, 11). He calls on the "the god" to help the three interlocutors to lay down a code of law (57). Strauss says that the Athenian "seeks the highest possible ground of law: the rule of law is the rule of the god" (58). But he adds that

this most powerful demand lacks, however, the clarity possessed, despite their ambiguity, by the earlier statements about the law and the true *logos*; for it conceals the fact that the rule of law is in fact the rule of laws laid down by human beings. (58)

By presenting the life of the lawgiver and the life of the poet as the only ways of life that have wisdom, the Athenian conceals that philosophy is a distinct way of life and that the philosopher pursues wisdom by relying on his own reason

or intellect. Even when he questions the law, he does so only after showing that his questions are authorized by what Strauss calls “the law of laws.” Strauss says that this amounts to finding a legal rather than a rational or philosophic justification of his criticism of the laws (11). But even though the Athenian sometimes does not say what he thinks in deference to the law (e.g. 52), his speeches eventually follow the *logos* (34) and show that the true meaning of revelation emerges to those who remember that what is divine is always supremely reasonable (7). Late in the commentary, Strauss characterizes the Athenian as exercising “human providence” (146). And late in the dialogue, the Athenian indicates that legislators are neither gods nor sons of gods (166, 169–70). For most of the dialogue, however, the Athenian presents himself as a figure who is simply political and pious rather than as a philosopher.

Why does the Athenian stranger pose as a lawgiver who can divine laws that a god would give us rather than as a philosopher? One possibility is that he wants to persuade experienced political men to support his laws, and they will do this spontaneously and passionately only if they believe that the laws have a divine source and divine support. But, again, this does not explain what prevents the Athenian from saying that he is a philosopher who has come to Crete to learn which laws Zeus wants us to live by. In the chapter on Book Three, Strauss calls attention to something that helps to explain why the Athenian keeps silent about philosophy for much of the dialogue:

Taking into account the *Laws* as a whole, we may observe that, since the day is very long, it is sufficient for elaborating a complete code of law; a complete code of law can be elaborated by a competent man in a single day of sufficient length. (42)

While it is impressive to lay out a complete code of law over any length of time, Strauss does not explain why being able to elaborate a legal code in only one day shows that the Athenian is a “competent man.” For his part, the Athenian gives the impression that the code of law that he elaborates is not entirely complete. He says in Book Six that legislators are like painters “who never reach the point where they no longer find anything to improve.” A painter who tried to paint a living being of “utmost beauty” would need a successor to maintain and to improve the painting in light of the limits of his art. Strauss says that this example is applicable to lawgiving “since the legislator paints the most beautiful (noble) life which he is able to paint” (92). Later, in the chapter on Book 11, Strauss again alludes to the importance of doing something in a single day. While discussing which offerings that are appropriate to give to the gods, he says that the “most divine gifts are birds (cf. *Phaedo* 118b7–8) and paintings

which a single painter could complete in a single day" (175). The thinking seems to be that a beautiful painting that can be executed by one man in one day must be divine since such a work could not be completed so quickly without the help of a god. And what is true of a painting would be true, *a fortiori*, of a code of law. Only a god or a prophet who is led by a god (*Laws* 968c1) could elaborate a complete code in a single day. Presenting himself as a man whose wisdom is derived from the gods and their laws, the Athenian uses philosophic reason to devise a code of law and elaborates that code in one day to test whether his law-bred interlocutors will accept it as divine.

Strauss reports that by the end of the dialogue Megillus is "so impressed by the glorious prospect that the Athenian has conjured up" that he declares with "unusual liveliness" that either the Athenian must help them found the colony or else they must abandon it. The commentary ends by reporting that Kleinias agrees fully, but the Athenian "naturally" does not reply (186). According to Strauss, Plato ends the dialogue here because the Athenian has followed Minos's path to the cave of Zeus and arrived not only at the origin of "all law" but also at "the natural order itself" (8, 11). This suggests that the Athenian's success with Kleinias and Megillus signifies more than that he has persuaded two old statesmen to accept new laws. Remembering the theologico-political problem to which Strauss alludes in the preface, we recognize that when Kleinias and Megillus fully accept that the Athenian has "conjured up" a code of divine law, they confirm that the Athenian knows what men like them expect divine law to be, what they expect it to achieve, and how they come to recognize and believe in it. By eliciting their spontaneous and passionate approval, the Athenian shows that he knows how to appeal not only to their calculating reason but also to their deepest longings. And what is most important, he does all this without the help of oracles, dreams, and the divinatory arts. Relying on his own reason and on his own knowledge of the political art, he has conversed with Kleinias and Megillos and has discerned in them an intelligible, natural basis of divine law (21; cf. Strauss 1995, 76).

When Strauss repeatedly refers to portions of the *Laws* as "sub-Socratic" (17, 27, 61, 182), he does not mean that it is un-Socratic or pre-Socratic. The Athenian is more guarded than Socrates because he is carrying out a different, but not unrelated, endeavor. Socrates is provocative because he tests whether his non-philosophic fellow citizens know the "greatest things" (*Apology* 22c–d), and this includes whether they have genuine knowledge of divine matters. When Socrates shows them that they do not know what they suppose they know, he observes that they often grow angry at him, and he regards this as a further sign of their ignorance (*Apology* 21c–d). They are angry at him, at least in part, because he has shown that they do not know what they thought they knew

about the gods. While Socrates carries out these refutations to confirm that no one else has divine wisdom, the Athenian never shows his interlocutors the depths of their ignorance nor ever compels them to examine themselves further about what they need. Instead, the Athenian explores what experienced political men believe about divine law, and he leads them to reject some beliefs about it and to adopt others in their place. The Athenian's accomplishment in the *Laws* complements what Socrates achieves in other dialogues: While Socrates leads his interlocutors to recognize, however briefly and dimly, that they do not have genuine knowledge about the gods, the Athenian induces morally serious, pious men to believe that he has helped them to know what a god is and about what a god requires of us. Taken together, Socrates' and the Athenian Stranger's successful endeavors confirm the political philosopher's competence in the study of divine matters.

3 The Philosophic Part of the Dialogue

Even though Strauss says that philosophy hesitates to show itself until the end of the dialogue, he characterizes one earlier part of the dialogue as "philosophic." In the chapter on Book Nine, he says that

[i]n the present context, i.e., shortly after the first mention of philosophy, the Athenian's oath indicates that we are on our way to the most philosophic, the only philosophic part of the *Laws*, Book Ten, in which the existence of the gods is demonstrated, i.e., in which the problem of the gods is directly faced. (129)

By saying that the signal that the dialogue will become philosophic comes not when the Athenian mentions philosophy but when he mentions it in association with an oath, Strauss emphasizes how deeply the philosopher is concerned with the theologico-political problem. At the end of *The City and Man*, Strauss says that "the all-important question which is coeval with philosophy" is the question "*quid sit deus?*" (Strauss 1964, 241). In this book, he says that the philosopher confronts the "problem of the gods" without elaborating what that problem is, except by saying that it comes to sight when the philosopher demonstrates the gods' existence.

Strauss begins his account of Book Ten by reporting the Athenian's remark that it is important to promote what the law teaches about the gods, since those who believe this teaching never say or do anything impious. Strauss says that this "compels or enables" the Athenian to discuss "what Adeimantos

calls 'theology' in the *Republic*." Strauss comments that Socrates takes up this topic while studying rudimentary education, whereas the Athenian addresses it while considering the penal law, thus suggesting that the Athenian's principal concern is not to reveal the truth about the gods but to support the law. Strauss underscores the importance of theology for actual politics by saying that "almost the whole of the Athenian's teaching seems to stand or fall" by the belief in gods. By referring to the piety of Kleinias and Megillus as piety as it is "commonly understood" (140), Strauss leads us to believe that the Athenian's theology will support the common piety that seems to be the foundation of the Athenian's teachings. Yet immediately Strauss indicates that the Athenian's interest extends beyond these concerns, for he points out that the Athenian also "questions piety." Strauss explains that the Athenian is a philosopher, and therefore he is "concerned with the truth about the gods" (140–41). Insofar as the Athenian's concern for the truth about the gods is reflected in the dialogue, the theology promises to support piety in a way that helps the careful reader make progress toward learning that truth.

Strauss recounts what the Athenian says about those who deny what the law teaches about the gods. One group denies that the gods exist, while another admits that they exist but denies that they care about human affairs. A third group believes that the gods care about us but can be bribed by prayers and sacrifices to overlook injustices. According to the Athenian, these deniers would joke that the legislators should prove the existence of the gods to them, but the legislators would provide a proof in all seriousness. Kleinias confidently replies that everyone recognizes the gods because they are manifest in the heavens and in the order of the seasons, but the Athenian refutes this by pointing out that some thinkers deny that the heavenly beings are gods. These deniers say that everything that is comes into being through nature, chance, or art. By nature, they mean "the first things" or the soul-less elements fire, water, earth, and air. Through "aimless and necessary motions," chance mixes the first things and brings into being the heavenly beings, animals, and plants. After this, mortals use art to fabricate gods and laws. Those who say this add that "right is might or victory," and for this they are called "wise" by the young (144). When Strauss asks if the Athenian is corrupting the young by introducing such speeches to Kleinias and Megillus and to those who would read the account of their conversation that will be included among the laws, he answers that the city will not be "as safe as human providence can make it" if the legislator does not alert it to threats posed by those who deny the gods. The Athenian will answer the natural philosopher's critique of piety both in order to protect the city from impiety and to assimilate it to Athens in a "qualified" way (146).

When the interlocutors resolve to refute the atheists, the Athenian sets out to prove that soul is prior to body or that soul “belongs to the first things” (146). To prove the priority of soul to body is a difficult task, and so the Athenian will have a dialogue with himself within the hearing of the others. He asks himself a series of questions about motion and rest that leads him to distinguish eight different kinds of motion. When he speaks of two motions that are exempt from change, Kleinias interrupts to ask what they are and thus puts an end to the Athenian’s “monologic dialogue,” even though his monologue was supposed to last until he had proven the priority of soul to body (147). After doubting that the Athenian has completed the desired proof, Strauss suggests that when Kleinias joins the dialogue, he replaces the Athenian and becomes responsible for the arguments in the demonstration while the Athenian takes the place of the “fictitious questioner” (147). If the subsequent reasoning about the gods should be ascribed to Kleinias rather than to the Athenian philosopher, then the discerning reader must seek its philosophic character not in the arguments that appeal to Kleinias but in the questions about that argument that would occur to the Athenian.

The refutation of the deniers begins when the Athenian says that many of those who deny the gods say that at one time all things were together and at rest. If so, he says, the first motion must have come about through some movement that originated in itself, and he further reasons that this original self-movement must be the most ancient and most powerful of all motions. If we observe self-motion arising in a body, then we say that such a body is alive. And when we say that something has a soul, we also say that it is alive. It seems to follow that the self-moving first motion must have been alive and must have been a soul. By arguing that soul must be among the first things, the Athenian indicates that the natural philosophers have failed to account for the origin of motion and thus also of soul and intellect. Because their account is incomplete, it cannot exclude the possibility that motion began through the purposive action of a god. Strauss points out that before drawing the inference that the first self-motion is a form of life and that it is thus also endowed with a soul, the Athenian swears by Zeus and thus “reminds us of the gods who had not been mentioned for some time and who can be thought to have been superseded by soul” (147–48). It seems that a rational demonstration of the existence of a cosmic god that does not also prove the existence of anthropomorphic gods implicitly raises questions about the existence of such gods.

When the Athenian concludes that the original self-moving motion is “soul” and that soul is the “first coming-into-being and motion of all things that are, have been, and will be, and also of their opposites,” Kleinias is entirely satisfied with this proof. Kleinias does not notice or is not troubled by the absence of any

reference to Zeus or other such god. Strauss adds that when the Athenian says that they have stated "correctly and decisively, most truly and finally" that soul has come into being "prior to our body" and that the body is in "second place and later," Kleinias agrees. While emphasizing how quickly Kleinias assents to all that is said, Strauss notes that the Athenian seems to be "less certain" (148).

In the midst of a long paragraph on page 148, Strauss goes on to discuss several "unresolved difficulties" with the argument that would have produced uncertainty in the Athenian's mind. His first difficulty with the argument is that the Athenian has not explained what caused soul to come into being. One reason why the Athenian might not attempt to explain how soul came into being may be that a search for the origin of any first cause might lead to an infinite regress of causes (147). But why does the Athenian seemingly overlook the possibility that there is an eternal cause of motion? After all, he says that "most" of the adversaries dare to say that at first all things were together and at rest prior to the beginning of motion (147), suggesting that there are some who say or think that motion is eternal. One reason why the Athenian might not suggest an eternal cause of motion may be that he wants to avoid speaking about any intelligible and eternal cosmic necessity that would prevent a god from doing whatever he wills. The desire to avoid suggesting that there are eternal necessities that govern the whole may help to explain why the Athenian does not mention the ideas until the very end of the dialogue or why the status of the ideas is "properly subdued" or "muted" in the *Laws* (184).

Strauss reveals his second difficulty with the proof of the existence of the god by asking whether it makes a difference whether we say that the soul originates all motions or whether we say that the soul is the cause of everything that is. Perhaps soul is the source of motion but not the lone cause of everything that is, either because there are eternal beings or because something in addition to soul has also brought things into being.

Strauss' third difficulty concerns the difference between the soul that causes motion in the cosmos and the human soul. He wonders if the "obfuscation of this difference is required for the *metabasis* from the soul to the gods." Strauss' reason for calling this an obfuscation seems to be that in a proof governed by rational argument, unsupported assertions are intended to obscure the implications of the proof. In this proof, the Athenian adduces no evidence from nature to support the claim that the cosmic soul is akin to the human soul, yet he goes on to characterize it as a soul with intellect, intentions, and virtue. By wondering if this obfuscation is a necessary condition for the cosmic soul to be transformed into gods, Strauss suggests that gods, at least in the plural, come into being only through our failure to recognize and accept the genuine character of the natural motions of the cosmos.

Strauss' final remark in this paragraph concerns a change in what the Athenian says are the "things of the soul" that soul brings into being. In the first case, his examples were "opinion, concern, intellect, art, and law" (892a7–b3), but in the second they are "manners, characters, wishes, calculations, true opinions, concerns, and memories." After questioning whether the Athenian does not repeat the first list because he will not speak of intellect in the plural, Strauss wonders if the emergence of false opinions must "wait for the emergence of bodies" (148). Strauss suggests here that false opinions arise because when soul mixes with body, body modifies, limits, and distorts the work of soul. If true, then this would mean that even if soul is the source of motion, it is not the single cause of everything that is. Yet as soon as Strauss raises this possibility, he says that it must be excluded by the "previous argument," that is, by the very argument that he has just called into question. But if that previous argument is doubtful and if body can be coeval with soul, as is implied by the Athenian's remark that soul "belongs to the first things" (146), then we must be open to the possibility that the allegedly self-originating first motion is not solely responsible for everything that has come into being.

After raising these difficulties, Strauss observes that the Athenian answers a question of his own about whether all the things of the soul can be the work of only one soul. Speaking again in dialogue with himself, the Athenian accounts for the presence of falsehood and imprudence in the whole not by explaining how body modifies what soul does but by positing the existence of two kinds of cosmic souls:

this management cannot be the work of a single soul; required are at least two souls, one which is beneficent (the cause of the good, noble, and just things) and the other of the opposite character. Hence, soul drives all things in heaven, earth, and sea by its own motions—such as wishing, considering, caring, deliberating, opining correctly or falsely, joy, grief, confidence, fear, hate, love—while bringing in their train and using the secondary motions, the motions of bodies, and thus causing all changes and states of body; if it is conjoined with intellect, it leads all things to correctness and happiness; but if it associates with senselessness, it produces the opposite effects. (149)

Strauss comments on this passage saying that "soul as soul...has all the motions of the human soul, even though it originates all motions in heaven and earth." He observes that "the primacy of the soul thus understood does not yet establish the existence of gods; but perhaps what most men understand by gods is, or approximates to, human souls, beneficial or the opposite, which

possess superhuman power" (149). When, Strauss points out, the Athenian asks Kleinias if the best soul or the soul with an opposite character cares for and orders the heavens, Kleinias no longer doubts that the best soul governs the heavens (149). Thus, Strauss highlights a telling example of how Kleinias's piety is able to shape how he perceives and understands the world around him. In Book Seven, Kleinias had claimed that the planets wander aimlessly (114), as they might appear to move to anyone who casually observes their paths. But Strauss points out that when, in Book 10, the Athenian argues that the good soul would rule the heavens and the rest of the whole cosmos in an orderly way, Kleinias recognizes that it would be "not only wrong but not even pious" to deny that it does so (150). In the end, Kleinias's piety leads him to assent to an argument about how the gods rule the heavens even if he must disregard what he believes he has seen with his own eyes.

After describing how the Athenian completes his proof of the existence of the gods, Strauss again raises a series of questions about the cogency of that proof. His first question returns to the second difficulty that he raised earlier, which is that the Athenian has not proven that soul, being entirely independent of body, must be the cause of everything that is. "One may wonder," he says, "whether the existence of gods lacking bodies, being invisible, and possessing altogether permanent and unchangeable shapes (cf. *Republic* 380d1–381c) has been established" (150). Strauss reminds us of the third difficulty that he has mentioned on page 148, which concerns the ambiguous assertion that the soul that originates all motion is similar to the human soul, by wondering (on page 150) if the heavenly bodies are capable of such motions as fear, anger, and grief. His last comment in the paragraph questions the existence of the "bad" soul:

Of more immediate relevance is the status of the bad soul which is responsible for the disorder occurring within the whole, and which is not mentioned any more in the sequel. The assumption of such a soul followed from the premise that the soul is in the last analysis the cause of all things. But perhaps this premise is not tenable; in that case the soul together with something that is not soul would be in the last analysis the cause of all things. (150)

The more tenable argument may be that soul is not the lone cause of all things because soul is always linked to or joined with body, so that what soul does is always affected by something that is beyond its complete control. Perhaps body rather than "bad" soul is the source of disorder and false opinion, too.

Strauss appears to have the disorder in the cosmos in mind when he concludes that “under no circumstances can the soul or souls guided by good sense and all virtue be the cause of everything—can it or they, can the gods, be omnipotent” (150). After all, if a god is necessarily good, then he lacks the power to cause any evil. Yet the conclusion that the gods cannot be omnipotent might also follow from a more general consideration about the character of natural theology itself. Natural theology rests on the premise that what the gods do, and what the gods are, must conform to rational principles that the gods themselves neither create nor change (cf. Strauss 1981, 39).

In the chapter on Book Nine, Strauss indicates that Book 10 is philosophic because it takes up “the problem of the gods,” but when he turns to Book 10 he does not specifically identify the problem that he has in mind. Yet his analysis of the proof of the existence of the gods helps us to understand some aspects of that problem. Strauss shows us that the Athenian’s proof redeems the study of nature by showing that what we know about nature—about motion, rest, and self-motion—indicates that natural philosophers have failed to provide a purely material account of the coming into being of everything. Having shown that the natural philosophers cannot exclude the possibility that a god originated the motion that brought everything into being, Strauss observes how the rational, natural proof of the existence of a cosmic god does nothing to establish the existence of the Olympian gods. Moreover, he notes how that proof merely asserts that the living cosmic soul has both a will and an intellect and alerts us to the possibility that our fears, hopes, and concerns lead us to attribute human qualities to natural beings. Thinking through the proof’s weaknesses, Strauss suggests how a natural philosopher might develop a more satisfactory account of how soul and body together bring all things into being. He does not, of course, claim that a natural philosopher could develop a complete account of how soul or motion without either a will or an intellect could combine with body to bring everything into being. Rather, his goal seems to be to show us how reasoning about nature can help us to see more clearly what we know and what we do not know from nature about the gods. By persuading men like Kleinias that the rational inquiry into nature can support both piety and divine law, the Athenian achieves in the dialogue the “qualified assimilation to Athens” that he seeks for the city in deed (146). And by helping the discerning reader to recognize how studying nature can contribute to our knowledge of the gods, including what is problematic about certain accounts of them, the Athenian makes Book 10 the distinctively philosophic book in the *Laws*.

Following the first proof, the Athenian demonstrates that the gods exercise providence over human beings. In order to show that the gods do not neglect human affairs, the Athenian asserts that they are like artisans who do not

neglect the smallest things in overseeing the whole cosmos. But since this argument lacks the force to compel a doubtful youth to assent to it, the Athenian employs "enchanting *mythoi*" that teach that although body and soul are not eternal, they are "imperishable, like the gods who are according to law" (155). After death, the souls of the unjust go to a place like Hades, while the souls of the just go to an "opposite place" (153). Strauss comments that the Athenian does not refer to the Olympian gods or to any gods who exercise punitive justice in the *logoi* of the second proof, but the Athenian does speak of them in the enchanting *mythoi*. The third proof argues that the gods cannot be bribed, since this would amount to betraying us, their allies, in the everlasting war that we wage against the bad soul or the "bad things" (154). Strauss leaves it to the reader to note that the existence of this war depends on a premise that he calls in question. Strauss notes that the Athenian apologizes for the "somewhat vehement" or "overzealous" character of "these speeches." Strauss again alludes to the doubts that he has raised about the seriousness of their surface teaching by saying that

although one might find that the apology applies most aptly to the *mythoi* and to the refutation of the denier of the third dogma, the context makes it certain that it is meant to apply to the whole theology. (155)

Thanks to the dialogue form, Strauss is able to trace a philosophic argument through a sub-Socratic theology.

After summarizing the penalties to be inflicted on those who deny the existence, providence, or justice of the gods, Strauss invites us to consider some of the difficulties to which the law is exposed. It is not clear how the law would punish someone who believes in the cosmic gods but not in the Olympic gods "unless the enchanting *mythoi* have the same status as the *logoi*." Asking how the law would treat a philosopher who surreptitiously doubts these gods, Strauss suggests that a philosopher would not be prosecuted. He also asks if Socrates would denounce such a man, but the pertinent question is whether Socrates himself would be denounced. The preface tells us that the new law regarding impiety is more favorable to Socrates than is the corresponding law at Athens. If Socrates were convicted of impiety under the Athenian's laws, he would be given years to spend in the *sophronesterion* (155), where he would converse with the guardians of the law, at least some of whom would have philosophic natures and philosophic educations. After that, he would be released if he is willing to keep quiet about his unbelief. Because the Dorian interlocutors have come to accept that impiety can be grounded in ignorance (141, 143), they now accept the propriety of trying to educate the impious before punishing them. By persuading them to agree to a qualified version of the

Socratic argument that vice is ignorance (130–32), the Athenian shows another way that they have been assimilated to “Athens” in a “qualified” manner (146).

4 Conclusion

Strauss returns to the *Laws*' theology in his commentary on Book 12, when he discusses the part of the dialogue in which the Athenian lifts the veil that has hung over philosophy. In this section, the Athenian persuades Kleinias and Megillus that the guardians of the law need to know the idea of virtue, the good, and the noble. In addition, they must also come to know “the being and power of the gods,” a knowledge that they acquire through studying the first *theologoumenon*, the proof of the existence of cosmic soul, and also the rule that intellect holds over the heavens. Noting that nothing is said about studying the second and third proofs or about the Olympian gods, Strauss draws attention to the Athenian's claim that only those who grasp that “the soul, while being immortal, is the oldest of all things which partake of generation and rules over all bodies” and who also know “the intellect in the stars” will firmly revere the gods (183). As Strauss elaborates, “Firmly established piety requires full assurance, full proof of the first *theologoumenon* which was in a manner proved in Book X” (184). He says that it is “clear” that firm piety does not require the second and third *theologoumena* (184). According to this reasoning, it seems that the *Laws* is Plato's most pious dialogue because it corrects, without undermining, the piety of men like Kleinias and Megillus and also because it brings to light the Athenian Stranger's rational piety.

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PART 6

Aristotle



Aristotle's Political Science, Common Sense, and the Socratic Tradition in *The City and Man*

Susan D. Collins

Although Leo Strauss discusses and cites Aristotle frequently in his works, his essay “On Aristotle’s *Politics*” in *The City and Man* is the only work he published that is devoted solely to the thought of Aristotle.¹ A cursory reading of the book’s Introduction suggests that the essay is intended as a response to what he calls here (and elsewhere) “the crisis of our time, the crisis of the West” (1).² A mere two sentences into his Introduction, Strauss announces that it is this crisis that “induces us to turn with passionate interest, with unqualified willingness to learn, toward the political thought of classical antiquity” (1; see also 11). He turns in this spirit to three classical works: Aristotle’s *Politics*, Plato’s *Republic*, and Thucydides’ *War of the Peloponnesians and Athenians*. In contrast to his treatment of the other two works, however, his opening essay on the *Politics* frequently ranges well beyond that text, in the first place because he must address certain objections to which his characterization of Aristotle’s *Politics* is exposed (12). That Strauss does not here present his full thought on the *Politics* or even on its central questions is clearly indicated at the end of the essay, where he attends only briefly to the “theme” of the *Politics*—the regime—and sets aside the discussion of its “guiding question”—the best regime—as “better discussed on another occasion” (49).³

Why, then, is Aristotle’s *Politics* Strauss’s starting point in addressing the crisis of the West and of our time in *The City and Man*? The specific concerns that motivate his turn to Aristotle are laid out in the Introduction, where he

1 I would like to thank Timothy Burns, Robert Bartlett, Michael Zuckert, Peter Ahrens Dorf, and Devin Stauffer for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter, as well as the Earhart Foundation, which made possible a research leave during which this work was completed.

2 Or the “crisis of modernity”; see Strauss (1989b), 81. Unless otherwise indicated, all parenthetical references in the text and footnotes are to Strauss (1964a).

3 Contrast his essay on the *Republic*, a more thorough textual commentary, attending to the dialogue’s central theme or problem, “the nature of political things—the nature of the city” (138).

adumbrates the crisis of the West, theoretical and political, and addresses the inability of present-day social science to provide guidance in that crisis.⁴ In this context, Strauss outlines a path back to Aristotle's political science, which begins from the "larger issue" of the break between the "scientific" understanding of political affairs and the "prescientific" or "citizen" understanding—"common sense"—of which the former is derivative (11). In moving to the essay proper, then, we have this problem in particular before us.

The concerns that Strauss raises in the Introduction reflect the twofold rhetorical appeal of the essay. On one hand, he clearly speaks to readers who seek to understand the theoretical roots of the crisis of our time, including those already well versed in his effort to recover classical political philosophy. On the other hand, he appeals most immediately to readers gripped by the moral and political dimensions of the current crisis: Even as he underscores the theoretical roots of this crisis, he speaks as much to its political dimensions, especially what he identifies as the West's loss of certainty in its purpose (5–6, 3). In the main, he calls for readers to turn to the political thought of classical antiquity not out of "self-forgetting and pain-loving antiquarianism nor self-forgetting and intoxicating romanticism" but with an "unqualified willingness to learn" (1). That he must first address particular objections to his presentation of Aristotle's political science suggests that this appeal will meet with more than one kind of resistance. The movement back to the thought of classical antiquity requires self-reflection or recollection—self-knowledge rather than self-forgetting.

Strauss's manner of writing, however, makes discerning his intention and thought difficult. Since he draws attention in *The City and Man* to the political and philosophic significance of a work's literary form, a reader of this work becomes especially alert to the manner in which Strauss presents his own "teaching" (21 and 43). As the fruit of his mature reflections,⁵ moreover, *The City and Man*'s Introduction and essay on Aristotle contain highly condensed

4 Strauss indicates the close connection between the Introduction and the essay proper in another version of them (1964b, 41 and 91).

5 At the same time as he is preparing the essays for publication, as revised versions of the Page-Barbour lectures of 1962, Strauss is completing a new preface to his work on Spinoza, which, as he writes to Kojève, "comes as close to an autobiography as is possible within the bounds of propriety." This intellectual autobiography is now possible in light of his more mature reflections on the central questions of his work, in particular, the theological-political problem. *The City and Man* is also preparatory to what he calls in the same letter his "real work," *Socrates and Aristophanes* (2013, 309), and, indeed, the former book ends with the question that he once considered making the epigraph of the latter: "*quid sit deus*" (Meier 2006, 26–7; see also Benardete 1978, 1).

versions of arguments treated in greater detail in his other works. This fact is immediately evident in his adumbration of the crisis and critique of present-day social science. Indeed, the difficulty of grasping Strauss's teaching is indicated already in his Preface, in which he remarks that the lectures on which the book is based allowed him to develop his views on "a rather neglected aspect of classical political thought" more fully than he otherwise might have done—an aspect of the classical tradition that he nowhere precisely identifies.⁶

All this is to say that I will only scratch the surface of Strauss's teaching. I aim first to clarify the context in which he turns to Aristotle: his presentation of the crisis of our time and of the relation between the prescientific or common sense understanding of political life and the "scientific" understanding. Second, I consider key points in his presentation of Aristotle that bear on the problem of common sense, focusing on the objections, theoretical and moral, that stand in the way of a recovery of the common sense or prescientific world presupposed by classical political philosophy, namely, the "city" understood above all, or most authoritatively, as "regime."

1 The Crisis of the West and Present-Day Social Science

The importance of Aristotle in *The City and Man* is indicated by the simple fact that he is the first of the ancient thinkers whose work the book addresses. Still, this starting point is hardly self-evident. For Aristotle is the latest in time of the three thinkers Strauss treats, and the first objection that he raises is the "traditional view" that Socrates and not Aristotle is the founder of political philosophy or political science (13). After completing his brief critique of present-day social science in the second part of the Introduction, Strauss provides a provisional reason for beginning with Aristotle's *Politics*: "social science cannot reach clarity about its doings if it does not possess a coherent and comprehensive understanding of what is frequently called the common sense view of political things," and that understanding "is available to us in Aristotle's *Politics*" (11–12).

Yet what Strauss means by the "common sense view of political things" and in what manner it is available in the *Politics*, as compared to the *Republic* or Thucydides' history, prove to be perplexing. Strauss describes the common sense view as that understanding of political things "as they are experienced by the citizen or statesman" (11), and he asserts that the "fully conscious form"

6 But cf. 240–41; see also Benardete (1978), 1 and Zuckert & Zuckert (2013), 146–48.

of this understanding is to be found in Aristotle's *Politics* (12).⁷ His turn to the *Politics*, however, is only the first step in an inquiry that travels in a reverse order of discovery: In his final essay, on Thucydides, he declares that "the quest for the 'common sense' understanding of political things which led us first to Aristotle's *Politics*, leads us eventually to Thucydides' *War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*" (240). In contrast to Aristotle as well as Plato—in contrast, that is, to the political philosophers—Thucydides presents most immediately and fully the perspective of the citizen and statesman, or "what is 'first for us' as distinguished from what is 'first by nature'" (239–40). For Thucydides presents the city, or the political community, "as it primarily understood itself": as "a world, the highest in the world," in which citizens are "completely immersed in political life"; and as a world that is "subject and subservient to the divine in the ordinary understanding of the divine" (241). We learn, in fact, that classical political philosophy presupposed this very view of the city even as it transcended it in an "ascent from what is first for us to what is first by nature" (240; cf. 17, 21, 25, 26–28, 49). One must turn to Thucydides, then, for the citizen's or common sense perspective. The "fully conscious understanding of political things" available in Aristotle's political science, in other words, already partakes in or reflects something of an ascent from this perspective (28; but cf. 21, 25–6).

The extended movement of Strauss's inquiry to its new beginning in Thucydides is complicated still further by his argument in the Aristotle essay itself that it is Socrates who is responsible for "a turn, or a return, to sanity, to 'common sense'" (19–20) and by the clearly central place of Plato's *Republic* and its investigation of the city in *The City and Man* (see esp. 138). Let us state more precisely, then, the question that first suggested itself: If Thucydides and not Aristotle presents the city as it primarily understands itself, why does Strauss begin with Aristotle in his investigation of common sense? And why does Strauss's inquiry, in its path from Aristotle to Thucydides, not only highlight Socrates' own turn to "common sense" but also present as central his investigation of the city in Plato's *Republic*?

To begin to understand Strauss's approach, we may start again from the impression that his initial move to Aristotle is prompted by the crisis confronting the West, which he describes in the Introduction using two different formulations. First, the "core" of the crisis is that what was originally a political philosophy has turned into an ideology or been replaced by ideology (2). This development has come about because the distinctive "presuppositions" of modern political philosophy—"Nature as understood by modern natural science and History as understood by modern historical awareness" (1)—have

7 See also Strauss (1968), 212–15; Behnegar (2003), 183–86; Zuckert & Zuckert (2013), 148–52.

proven to be incompatible with modern political philosophy itself. The core of the crisis thus seems to be theoretical or philosophic, and it presents a stark choice: we either abandon political philosophy altogether or undertake a return to classical political philosophy. But is such a return possible if the developments that have led to the crisis of modern political philosophy have buried classical political philosophy as well? This difficulty, too, belongs to our present predicament.

In the sequel, Strauss links his first formulation of the crisis with a second, which describes what the crisis “consists in,” focusing on its moral and political elements: “The crisis of the West consists in the West’s having become uncertain of its purpose” (3).⁸ He arrives at this formulation after sympathetically criticizing Spengler’s diagnosis of the crisis as the “going down (or decline) of the West” at the time of the First World War. Spengler saw the West not only as one of a very few high cultures, but also as the “comprehensive” and “final” culture in having reached “full consciousness of culture as such” (2). Given the character of this peak, Spengler believed that “the decline of the West is identical with the exhaustion of the very possibility of high culture; the highest possibilities of man are exhausted” (2).⁹ In criticizing Spengler’s diagnosis, Strauss points to an error internal to it: the highest human tasks cannot be exhausted since “our highest authority, natural science, considers itself susceptible of infinite progress” (2). Spengler’s diagnosis evidently does not call into doubt the authority of natural science, and history cannot be at an end or completion if fundamental riddles—the riddles of science—remain to be solved.

Strauss thus indicates that Spengler fails to pinpoint the real cause or nature of the crisis that afflicts us because he does not think deeply enough about the character of modern science, especially its promise of infinite progress.¹⁰

8 See also Strauss (1952), xv and Strauss (1989a), 238–39.

9 Strauss observes in “Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy” (1983, 32) that “Spengler has merely brought out the ultimate conclusion of Hegel’s thought,” namely that “this absolute peak of history, being the end of history, is at the same time the beginning of the final decline.”

10 The condensed character of Strauss’s writing is especially evident here in his brief treatment of Spengler, which does not lay out the ground of this criticism or defect. In the unpublished lecture “Living Issues in German Postwar Philosophy,” Strauss himself recalls that “Spengler’s work was a most ruthless attack on the validity or the value of modern science and philosophy (and indeed of science and philosophy altogether)” (Meier 2006, 118). But he then goes on to describe the “philosophical deficiency of Spengler’s teaching”: “it required as its basis an elaborate philosophy of man, of human existence as being essentially historical; a philosophy showing that man as the historical being is the origin of all meaning; and this presupposed an analysis of truth, an analysis showing that

By contrast, Strauss intimately links the political crisis of the West with the transformation of philosophy that reconceived its work or activity and made preeminent the science that is now our highest authority and at the heart of the modern notion of progress: "According to the modern project, philosophy or science was no longer to be understood as essentially contemplative and proud but as active and charitable" (3). The great thinkers who laid the groundwork of this project—Strauss uses the language of Bacon, Locke, and Rousseau¹¹—set philosophy or science to work in the "conquest of nature" for "the relief of man's estate," "comfortable self-preservation," and progress toward ever greater prosperity, freedom, and justice. Instead of directly challenging the theoretical premises of this new philosophy or science—its understanding of Nature, for example—Strauss highlights the moral-political aim animating the transformation of philosophy: modern thinkers sought "to build a society superior in truth and justice to the society toward which the classics aspired" (3). This society would necessarily be universal in kind since modern political philosophy understood itself as guided by "the natural needs of man" and as acting for human beings as such (3). According to Strauss, however, this problem of a universal society of prosperity, freedom, and justice—of a society "superior in truth and justice"—is the rock on which the confidence of the West begins to founder. For the resistance to this universal society is why the West begins to become "uncertain of its purpose" (2).

The universal society was called into doubt as a practical fact by the confrontation between the West and Communism, especially the continued resistance of Stalinist Russia. If for a time Communism was seen to be the "wayward twin" of the West, wild and impatient but devoted to the same universal end, eventually it "revealed itself even to the meanest capacities as Stalinism and post-Stalinism" (4). Such resistance to the Western project raised doubt about its universality—in seeking to transform the world, modern political philosophy also risked rebuke by this world. This doubt was deepened by a certain realization regarding the difference between the West and Communism, which otherwise appeared to share the same end. For the two proved to differ not simply in degree but in kind, since they differed regarding "the choice of means" to that end—that is, this difference in kind "was seen to concern morality" (5). In short, "for Communism, the end, the common good of the whole human race, being the most sacred thing, justifies any means; whatever contributes

truth is essentially relative to human existence. Such a philosophy was elaborated by *Heidegger*" (119). See also Strauss (1953), 20, 38, and 8.

11 See Strauss (1964b), 44–5, where he names Bacon and Locke in particular; also see also his essay on Aristotle (40), where he discusses Rousseau.

to the achievement of the most sacred end partakes of its sacredness and is therefore itself sacred; whatever hinders the achievement of that end is devilish" (5). Rather than explore this difference—so replete with references to the sacred that it points to a fundamental rejection of the rationalism and individualism of the Western project—Strauss notes simply that it led to a second realization: "it became clearer than it had been for some time that no bloody or unbloody change of society can eradicate the evil in man: as long as there will be men, there will be malice, envy, and hatred, and hence there cannot be a society which does not have to employ coercive restraint" (5). In confronting its enemies, then, the West could place its confidence not in the universality of its project but only in its "immense military power" (5).

This experience provided a "twofold lesson": a "political lesson" and a "lesson regarding the principles of politics" (5). Focusing first on the political lesson—that for the foreseeable future no universal state is possible—Strauss highlights the particularity of every political society, even those that raise universal claims, as does the secular West in the present day, and as did also Christianity and Islam in the centuries in which they confronted one another. Hence, he observes, "for the foreseeable future, political society remains what it always has been: a partial or particular society whose most urgent and primary task is its self-preservation and whose highest task is its self-improvement" (6). But the same experience that made the West doubtful of a universal state also made it doubtful of its understanding of its *own* "highest task," its "self-improvement." Questions arose, that is, not only about political practice but also about political principles: whether, in particular, "affluence is the sufficient and even necessary condition of happiness or justice" if the affluence central not just to comfortable self-preservation but also to the higher end of self-improvement does not cure "the deepest evils" (6). The political crisis of the West thus consists in our uncertainty regarding the principles of justice and happiness in which the original project had confidence: uncertainty regarding what end or ends we should pursue and in what way, or how we should live, individually and collectively.

This difficulty frames Strauss's discussion in the second part of the Introduction of present-day social science and the "new political science" that arose from it.¹² For the modern transformation of philosophy not only led to

12 Strauss uses the same title, "new political science," to distinguish Hobbes's political science (1952, ch. 8), which has its foundation in his political philosophy proper and takes Euclid's geometry as its model. Here Strauss means more narrowly the political science of contemporary social science, the foundation of which is not clear, at least to itself, and the model for which is modern natural science. See also Strauss (1968), 203.

the crisis of the West as he has described it; it also gave rise to a science of man and human affairs that is unable to address this crisis. To the contrary, contemporary social science serves to underscore and so deepen it: "The doubt of the modern project . . . has acquired the status of scientific exactitude, for present-day social science admits and even proclaims its inability to validate any value-judgments proper" (6).¹³ Modern political philosophy has thus "turned into" an ideology, for the "*teaching* originated by modern political philosophy"—that is, the teaching concerning the "universal and prosperous society"—cannot, according to positivist, value-free social science, be defended as "superior in truth and justice to any other among the innumerable ideologies" (6–7, my emphasis).¹⁴

By its own self-understanding, however, present-day social science is *itself* free of ideological bias, even though it is the product of a particular culture or civilization.¹⁵ Yet as Strauss proceeds, this very assumption of present-day social science comes under scrutiny. Although the originators of the modern project "took it for granted that philosophy and science are identical,"¹⁶ the progressive element of modern natural science has entailed their separation. For in the name of progress, the "unchangeable human nature" that had originally set the end and limits of the project, as well as its justice or rightness, had to be conquered. The new distinction between science as the study of the "neutral Is" and philosophy as the study of the "rational Ought" held out the promise that reason could develop "rational norms" that would direct the project.¹⁷ But the abandonment of nature in favor of the rational ought led only to the "depreciation of reason" (7); philosophy became increasingly devalued against empirical science, given the latter's evident grasp of what truly is, as opposed to what ought to be, and its extraordinary expansion of human power. As for political philosophy, the consequence was necessarily "decay." Once a living guide for human affairs, it was replaced by the history of politi-

13 Cf. Strauss (1953), 3–5.

14 See Strauss (1989b), 81: "The crisis of modernity reveals itself in the fact, or consists in the fact, that modern western men no longer knows what he wants—that he no longer believes that he can know what is good and bad, what is right and wrong." See also Strauss (1952), xv; Bruell (2011), 94–5.

15 See again Strauss (1953), 38.

16 See "An Epilogue," where Strauss writes similarly of Aristotle, "For Aristotle, political science is identical with political philosophy because science is identical with philosophy (1968, 205). By contrast, however, Strauss does not indicate that Aristotle took this claim "for granted."

17 See Strauss (1959), 13–27; (1968), 205–12; (1953), 40–2 for more detailed accounts of this transformation.

cal philosophy, understood as a “survey of more or less brilliant errors” (8). New disciplines, such as scientific psychology and logic, took its place. Its subject matter—political life itself—was taken over by the new political science. Modeled on natural science, the new and now orthodox approach aimed to discover “laws of political behavior and ultimately universal laws of political behavior” (8).¹⁸ In being thus “scientific” if “nonphilosophic,” this approach is powerfully supported by our “highest authority” (8).

Yet the difficulty that Strauss next raises sets us on the path back to Aristotle. For the great tradition of political philosophy would simply want for a decent burial were it not for the following problem: In taking the place of the older tradition while also claiming to be a science, the new approach must address the question of its foundations. The question can be raised, that is, as to whether the *method* that has replaced political philosophy, and not only its teaching, is itself an ideology.¹⁹ As Strauss points out, if political science is to discover universal laws of behavior—or, more simply, if it is to live up to its own claim to be scientific—it must study not only its own “home” but also “other climes and other ages” (8). In undertaking the necessary historical studies, moreover, the political scientist must examine both institutions and the ideologies informing these institutions. He must seek to grasp these ideologies as they were understood, to be sure, by their politically active adherents but also, in some cases, by the “outstanding men” who originated them. Alluding to Weber, Strauss observes that “if the routinization of charisma is a permitted theme, the vulgarization of thought ought to be a permitted theme” (9).²⁰ One can distinguish the original understanding from the vulgar—or see the former as the “rationalization” it is assumed to be—only if one grasps the thought of its originator as he understood it himself and so approach this thought without the presuppositions that belong to modern historical awareness. The crisis of our time has therefore had the “accidental advantage” that in necessitating such an inquiry, arising from the science itself, it makes possible a “genuine understanding of the political philosophies proper and therewith primarily of classical political philosophy” (9). Such a fresh or non-derivative study is

18 Many political scientists today make apparently more modest claims—that they can establish, for example, only probabilistic laws, which are conditional and always subject to revision—but see then Strauss's more precise statement about the character of modern science in his essay on Aristotle (43). Social science may be grappling with its limitations, but it does so without conceding the universality of the empirical or “positive” *method* for the study of political behavior.

19 See also Strauss (1959), 203–05 and 78–9.

20 See esp. Strauss (1953), chapter two, for his respectful but searching critique of Weber.

especially important for the return to classical political philosophy, which has otherwise been seen “through the lenses of modern political philosophy and its various successors” (9).

The steps that Strauss sketches here constitute the way to a new and fuller self-knowledge of political science *as a science*. One might put the matter in the following manner in anticipation of his treatment of the Socratic tradition in the work as a whole: the political scientist who becomes aware of the problem of the ground of his science must undertake something resembling the “Socratic turn” (cf. 19). More precisely, if he comes to see that his science “rests on certain hypotheses, certainties, or assumptions,” he is compelled by his own claim to scientific knowledge to embark on an inquiry into these very presuppositions.²¹ Undertaken without prejudice, his historical studies will reveal the manner in which philosophy or science was transformed: the modifications of classical political philosophy by modern political philosophy, and of modern political philosophy itself by later developments.²² The political scientist Strauss conjures may thus begin to wonder about the soundness of his own presuppositions, and even whether classical political philosophy, and not his own social science, is “the true science of political things”—to recall one of Strauss’s opening statements, this particular political scientist may begin to wonder whether political philosophy is the “rightful queen of the social sciences” (10; cf. 1).

Of course, Strauss is under no illusion that the discipline itself will follow such a path.²³ Not the least obstacle, particularly in its being “hidden,” is the powerful prejudice with which present-day social science is allied, “the belief in progress or in the rationality of the historical progress” (10–11).²⁴ Strauss’ argument, in other words, is not intended to persuade members of the guild, nor is it likely to do so. But for the one who is awake or awakened to the problem of science, he points out a path back to the older political science of Aristotle.

21 There are also sound political reasons for undertaking such an inquiry, especially since the new political science is “an authority within a democracy” and hence “owes an account of itself to those who are subjected, or are to be subjected to it” (Strauss 1968, 203).

22 In this context, Strauss dismisses the historicist argument that both the originator and the “historian” are necessarily captives of their own time or subjective understanding. Cf. Strauss 1959, 26, where he identifies historicism in its full growth, as compared with positivism, as the “serious antagonist of political philosophy.” See also Strauss (1959), 57, where he observes that the question historicism raises “is today the most urgent question for political philosophy.”

23 One need only recall the concluding lines of “An Epilogue,” Strauss’s more polemical critique of the “new science of politics” (Strauss 1968, 223).

24 See also Strauss (1968), 8 and 22–23; (1989a), 234–39.

Yet there are obstacles to be faced, and, in the penultimate paragraph of the Introduction, Strauss emphasizes the “tentative or experimental” character of the return to classical political philosophy. For the distinction between facts and values that is the “fundamental premise of present-day social science” points to a “larger issue”: the dependency of the scientific understanding of political life on the pre-scientific or citizen’s understanding. Because this latter understanding is not value-free—it is, in fact, Strauss will suggest, the very locus of morality (see esp. 48)—the contemporary distinction between facts and values is radically alien to it. It is this problem that most immediately motivates the turn to Aristotle’s *Politics* as to the common sense view of political things. For even should the “scientific” understanding prove superior in some way, it must possess a “coherent and comprehensive understanding of its basis or matrix” if it is to make intelligible and legitimate its modification of the prescientific view—the “new political science” must undertake such an endeavor if it is to be the science it claims to be and not itself an “ideology.” As the fully conscious form of the common sense understanding of political things, then, Aristotle’s political science would appear to supply this basis or matrix and hence to be deeply relevant to our present predicament (11).

In the final paragraph of the Introduction, however, Strauss emphasizes the “provisional” character of his description of Aristotle’s political science. For the distinction between common sense and science he has drawn presupposes science primarily understood as “modern natural science,” whereas the *Politics* obviously does not. Contrary to Strauss’s own counsel (10), then, we approach Aristotle with certain questions that do not obviously belong to his thought, at least not in the exact terms in which they arise for us. What is more, even should the return to his political science address and even somehow resolve the theoretical difficulty that is the core of the crisis, it is not clear, at the outset at least, how or even whether it can address what the crisis consists in. Strauss’s first step in confronting such difficulties is to propose that, by considering the objections to his characterization of Aristotle’s *Politics*, we may come to a “more adequate understanding of the *Politics*” (12). We must address these objections particularly in our present predicament since science has itself modified the character of our political life: what is “common sense” for us is already mediated by modern natural science.²⁵ Still, the problem presented by present-day social science may have the accidental advantage of helping us to recollect questions and concerns that modern science, as our highest authority, has obscured. Strauss’s essay on Aristotle’s *Politics* thus aims to clear the way for readers to approach the thought of classical antiquity—of Aristotle as

25 See 30, as well as Strauss (1953), 79; (1959), 23–25; (1968), 213.

well as of his predecessors Plato and Thucydides—with the unqualified willingness to learn that, in the Socratic tradition, is choice-worthy for its own sake but that is also profoundly needed in our time.

2 Aristotle's Political Science and Socratic Political Philosophy

The steps Strauss takes toward a more adequate understanding of the *Politics* are suggested first by the thematic order of the essay, which is divided into five sections, indicated by a dash at the end of each (29, 35, 41, 45). The first three sections focus on specific objections that confront his characterization of Aristotle's political science. The fourth elucidates the problem—the status of natural inequality—that more fundamentally divides Aristotle from the modern tradition. The final section briefly addresses what Strauss then identifies as the true theme of the *Politics*, the regime (*politeia*), as well as its “guiding question,” the best regime (cf. 16 with 45 and 48–9). The order of Strauss's discussion suggests that we are prepared to grasp the significance of the principle of the regime in Aristotle's *Politics* only once we have addressed the difficulties raised in the first four sections.

In focusing on the central concerns of the essay, I confine my discussion to three tasks. Of the set of objections to his characterization of Aristotle's *Politics*, I pay particular attention to the first of them: the “traditional view” that Socrates and not Aristotle is the founder of political philosophy or political science. I then examine the next three sections to clarify what Strauss sees to be the obstacles for us, in our age, to an open-minded return to Aristotle, especially the role of natural inequality in his thought. I conclude with an outline of his treatment of the regime in the final section.

Comprising fifteen of the essay's thirty-three paragraphs, the opening section is by far the longest of the five. Its discussion of the distinctiveness of Aristotle's political science from its Socratic root²⁶ sets it apart from the other sections, and the conclusion of its central paragraph is thematically linked with his essay on Plato's *Republic*, which begins with the same question, namely, the literary form in which Plato and Aristotle present their “teachings”

26 Strauss reproduces in this context also part of his treatment of Socrates at the beginning of chapter 4 of *Natural Right and History*, and a comparison of the two discussions sheds light on key questions of *The City and Man*, especially the relation between natural right and philosophy, and the manner in which Socrates proceeds in investigating the political or human things.

(21). Indeed, the figure of Socrates, naturally at the heart of Strauss's treatment of the *Republic*, looms large in the first fifteen paragraphs of the essay on Aristotle, and then all but disappears in the last eighteen, in which we are more likely to hear from Thomas Aquinas or from modern thinkers, such as Spinoza, Leibniz, Rousseau, and Hegel.

Strauss deals first with a contemporary objection to the traditional view, that prior even to Socrates, the Greek sophists "turned to the study of the human things" (14); the opening section, that is, involves not one but two objections. His response to the contemporary objection leads him first to a discussion of the Athenian stranger's treatment, in Plato's *Laws*, of "the predecessors," for whom law and justice are matters of convention, rather than nature. By "nature," these predecessors mean certain "first things . . . responsible for the coming into being and perishing of everything that comes into being and perishes," as well as this coming into being and perishing itself (14). Opposite to these things, they distinguish those that are "by *nomos*" and exist "only by men holding them to be or positing that they are or agreeing as to their being," and they place in this category not only justice or the lawful, but, above all, the gods (14). By contrast, the Athenian stranger asserts that there are just things by nature, and he traces his divergence from the predecessors to the fact that "the latter admitted as first things only bodies whereas according to him, the soul is not derivative from the body or inferior in rank to it but by nature the ruler over the body" (16). For justice, as the "common good *par excellence*," can exist only if there are things that are by nature common, whereas "the body appears to be by nature each one's own or private" (16).

With the Athenian stranger, Aristotle too asserts that there are just things by nature (cf. 14 with 16). According to Strauss, he goes so far down this road as to assert the claim for which his political science is most famous: "that the political association is by nature and that man is by nature political because he is the being characterized by speech or reason and thus capable of the most perfect, the most intimate union with his fellows which is possible: the union in pure thought" (16–17). So key is this view of the city and man that "for Aristotle, political philosophy is primarily and ultimately the quest for that political order which is best according to nature everywhere," and, Strauss adds, "always" (17; cf. NE 1135a3–5). By one reading, Aristotle thus appears to identify the city, or the political community as such, with the union in pure thought made possible by the human capacity for speech or reason—a road down which clearly the predecessors, and perhaps even the Athenian stranger, do not go (cf. also 49). Nevertheless, against the predecessors, who depreciate the political things as merely a matter of convention and so as not serious or

worthy of serious study in their own right, Plato's Socrates—or his stand-in, the Athenian stranger—and Aristotle form a united front. For not only do they assert that there are things just by nature, but they also show by deed that they regard the political art or science as a most serious pursuit (14–15, 16–17).

In disposing of the contemporary objection regarding the Sophists, Strauss still leaves standing the traditional view. For, given his regard for the political things and inquiry into them, why is Socrates not to be considered the founder of political science? Strauss observes that unlike Socrates, Aristotle establishes political science as a discipline independent of theoretical wisdom: “as one discipline, and by no means the most fundamental or highest discipline, among a number of disciplines” (21). Aristotle accomplishes this feat in part by his “discovery” of self-sufficient principles of prudence or practical wisdom, which is to say, by his “discovery” of moral virtue as an end and good in its own right—as an “absolute” (25 and 27). By preserving this sphere of “prudence united with moral virtue,” Aristotle is able to found a science of politics as separate from the other sciences, with its own guiding principles (25–6; cf. 29). His political science thus does not begin from principles grounded in theoretical science: he does not offer, for example, an account of the soul from which he then derives the virtues. Rather, he takes his bearings from “principles which are fully evident only to gentlemen” (25), remaining “within the limits of an unwritten *nomos* which is recognized by well-bred people everywhere” (26). In remaining within such limits, Aristotle not only preserves the citizen understanding, but also founds an independent science of politics.

What, then, is the status of the distinction between nature and convention in his political science? This distinction comes to the fore in a practical way once the question is raised, “why should one be decent”? At the very least, this question calls for a defense of the goodness of the virtues as in accord with our nature:

It is not therefore sufficient to know what justice, magnanimity and the other virtues are and to be moved by their beauty; one must show that they are good. One must then transcend the sphere of prudence or of what one may call the moral consciousness. One must show that the practice of the moral virtues is the end of man by nature, i.e., that man is inclined toward such practice by nature. This does not require that man by nature know his natural end without any effort on his part. The natural end of man as well as of any other natural being becomes genuinely known through theoretical science, through the science of the natures. (26)

Not least in defense of the moral virtues, then, Aristotle is compelled to show that the inquiry into political things points to theoretical wisdom—that, in other words, the sphere of politics or prudence is *not* wholly self-sufficient, as it might otherwise seem to the gentleman or to well-bred people everywhere. Hence Aristotle “removes a screen” that blocks the gentleman’s vision. Aristotle is the founder of political science as the *fully conscious form* of common sense because he preserves the “unwritten *nomos*” of the well-bred—the perfection of man’s nature, his happiness, is to be found within the best political order and is identical with lawfulness—while bringing as much clarity as possible within the limits of prudence (26, 28; cf. 153).

But why does Socrates, who in fact initiated the turn to the human things “as a turn, or a return, to sanity, to ‘common sense,’” never establish a political science in this manner (19)? He too undertakes his inquiry into the political things not on the basis of theoretical presuppositions about what is best or highest by nature but by attending directly to the things that are “first in themselves” as they are “somehow ‘first for us’ ” (19). Strauss indicates the philosophic necessity of beginning as Socrates does by prefacing the discussion of his return to common sense with Aristotle’s critique of Hippodamus in the second book of the *Politics*. Aristotle acknowledges that Hippodamus’s proposal concerning the best political order represents “a kind of political philosophy,” at least insofar as he was “the first man not engaged in political life who attempted to speak about the best political order” (17). But, in attempting to impose on political life mathematical “clarity and simplicity,” based on an account of the whole of nature that has the number 3 at its center, Hippodamus’s science of politics proves instead to involve great confusion. This confusion arises because Hippodamus “did not pay attention to the peculiar character of political things: he did not see that the political things are in a class by themselves” (19). His failure to found political philosophy thus stems from the fact that “he did not begin by raising the question ‘what is political’ or rather ‘what is the *polis*?’ ” (19).

Precisely because Socrates does raise this very question, and all the related “what is” questions, he—and not Hippodamus, or even Aristotle for that matter—“became the founder of political philosophy” (19).²⁷ In attending to the “what is” questions, Socrates understands himself to be grasping the “cause *par excellence*” of the thing in question: its “class or class character” (19). In contrast to the predecessors, he thereby does not reduce its cause to what they call “nature”: “first things” that are “responsible for the coming into being and perishing of everything that comes into being and perishes” (14). Indeed, in contrast even to the Pythagorean, Hippodamus, Socrates does not begin

27 Cf. Strauss (1953), 120, and Strauss & Cropsey (1987), 5.

from any notion of cause outside of the class or class character of the thing in question.²⁸

In turning to the “what is” questions, rather, Socrates attends to things that are “first in themselves” as these are captured and revealed in our opinions and so as they are “somehow first for us” (19). These opinions have “a certain order,” the highest or most authoritative of which are the laws. For the law “makes manifest the just and noble things and it speaks authoritatively about the highest beings, the gods who dwell in heaven” (20). In addressing directly the opinions about what is right and noble, Socrates shows the path *from* these opinions to “what is by nature right and noble,” but he does so not by way of theoretical propositions or discursive arguments about nature but by way of “dialectics” and “with a new awakesness, caution, and emphasis” (20).

In this context, Strauss implicitly contrasts Aristotle’s view of political philosophy, as the quest for the political order that is best everywhere and always, to political philosophy understood in its original, Socratic, form: “In its original form political philosophy broadly understood is the core of philosophy or rather ‘the first philosophy’” (20).²⁹ Socrates’ manner of proceeding arises from his awareness of the philosophic necessity of beginning from the opinions: in rejecting the presupposition of the predecessors regarding cause or the first things, he turns to the human things and the realm of opinion, because it is here that we hold and grasp the things that are first simply as they are first for us. As Strauss has made clear, the most authoritative of these are opinions about what is noble and just, and about the highest beings, the gods. Only by beginning here is Socrates able both to do justice to these opinions and to show the justified ascent from them toward knowledge.³⁰ Most crucially, both Socrates’ turn and his ascent are distinguished by his awareness that “the roots of the whole are hidden” and that while there can be “partial knowledge of parts,” there is “no knowledge of the whole”—by his awareness, in other words, of the “elusiveness of the whole” (19–21).³¹ Like Aristotle, then, Socrates does not unqualifiedly transcend the sphere of opinion, yet more clearly than Aristotle, he shows the necessary directedness of this sphere to the philosophic life, understood as the search for wisdom in the face of the elusive or mysterious character of the whole about which and within which the philosopher seeks wisdom. By contrast, Aristotle’s separation of the

28 See also Strauss & Cropsey (1987), 5.

29 Cf. Strauss (1959), 10 and 93–4.

30 Strauss (1953), 124.

31 Or what Strauss calls elsewhere “the mysterious character of the whole” (1959, 38–9).

sciences would appear to presuppose or posit independent and knowable “first principles,” practical and theoretical, that ground the separate disciplines. Only by proceeding in this way can Aristotle found political science “as one discipline, and by no means the most fundamental or the highest discipline, among a number of disciplines” (see again 21).

This difference between Aristotle and Socrates is reflected in the literary forms in which the “teachings” of Aristotle and Plato are transmitted: the treatise and the dialogue respectively. For while the truths or propositions of science may be communicated in treatise form, the dialectical inquiry at the core of the Socratic way of life is captured most perfectly only in the form of a dialogue (21 & 50–62). In each case, the distinction between convention and nature—the lawful and the natural—is present. But in undertaking his dialectical ascent from convention to nature, Socrates remains aware of the incomplete or indefinite character of this ascent given the “unavailability of knowledge of the whole” (20–21). Because he thus is aware of the “greater evidence” of the beginning—of the opinions and the questions that they raise—than of the end, he understands that “return to the beginning remains a constant necessity” if he is to justify the life of philosophy (21).

Does Strauss mean to indicate, therefore, that this awareness, if it is not wholly absent in Aristotle, is at least obscured by his political science and the manner in which he presents his teaching? Is it the case that, unlike the Socratic inquiry, Aristotle's own political science does begin from or is ultimately secured by “presuppositions” that are, in the final analysis, uncertain or subject to question—presuppositions regarding nature or the naturalness of the city, for example? Strauss indicates several qualifications to an affirmative answer to this question (see again, 26, 28, as well as 21, 23–25). Yet we nevertheless see that Aristotle and not Socrates is the founder of political *science* since the manner in which the former attends to the world of common sense makes possible this development, whereas the manner in which the latter proceeds necessarily obstructs it.³²

In proceeding as he does, moreover, Aristotle further evidences his view of the seriousness of the political things, for “he acts directly as the teacher of indefinitely many legislators or statesmen whom he addresses collectively and simultaneously” (21; also cf. 14–15 with 18 and 29). That Socrates too considered the inquiry into the political things a serious pursuit, if for different reasons, is noted by Strauss shortly before the end of this opening section:

32 Cf. Strauss (1959), 83.

But since love of wisdom is not wisdom and philosophy as prudence is the never-to-be completed concern with one's own good, it seems impossible to know that the philosophic life is the best life. Socrates could not know this if he did not know that the only serious alternative to the philosophic life is the political life and that the political life is subordinate to the philosophic life: political life is life in the cave which is partly closed off by a wall from life in the light of the sun; the city is the only whole within the whole or the only part of the whole whose essence can be wholly known. (29)

Whatever their disagreements, Strauss observes, Aristotle and Plato agree as to the closedness and openness of the city to the whole and as to the wall that separates the city from the rest of the whole. We might thus be tempted to draw this conclusion: Since Socrates does not appear in the *Laws*, "the only political work proper of Plato," he did not become the founder of political science because his philosophic activity gave him no leisure (29).³³ Knowing whether we should resist this temptation would require, among other things, a more complete understanding of the "disagreements" between Plato and Aristotle to which Strauss also points—especially their views regarding the possibility of wisdom in the fullest sense and regarding the distinctive political task of the philosopher, as philosopher.³⁴

3 Aristotle's Political Science and the Modern Transformation of Philosophy

In the second section, Strauss returns to the question of common sense, but this time to treat an objection that reflects modern historical awareness: the "matrix" of Aristotle's political science is "not common sense simply but the common sense of the Greeks, not to say the common sense of the Greek upper class" (30). Strauss addresses this objection by investigating what is

33 See also Strauss (1959), 4.

34 See, for example, the essay on the *Republic*, 119, as well as "Progress and Return," (Strauss 1989a, 260): "Generally speaking, it seems that in classical thought the decisive questions were thought to have been answered as far as they can be answered. The only exception of which I know is Plato, who held that the fulfillment proper, namely full wisdom, is not possible but only quest for wisdom, which means philosophy." See also Strauss (1995b), 131–33 and Bruell (2011), 100–01.

adduced as evidence for it, namely, that the theme of Aristotle's *Politics* is "the Greek city-state" (30) or the city as a form of the state.

Strauss first notes the historical evidence against this claim: the city as a political form may be peculiarly Greek but not essentially so, as we see with Carthage, a non-Greek city highly praised by Aristotle. Yet the "more serious difficulty" is that the very notion of the city not only antedates the idea of the state but also cannot be contained within it. Indeed, the classical notion of the city—as the highest and most comprehensive society, aiming at the highest and most comprehensive good, human happiness—transcends the modern distinction between the state, as the public sphere of coercive action, and society, as the private sphere of individual striving and happiness. Even in our time, such a distinction proves inadequate both in practice and in theory. The "nearest English equivalent" to the "city" for a citizen today is the "country," since civic devotion is necessarily oriented toward something higher or more encompassing than either state or society. What is more, we would have "direct access" to the city through a consideration of the country, but for "the highest modern equivalent of 'city'" that originates in theory: the notion of culture (30–31, 33). For complex theoretical reflections about society as the locus of distinctively *voluntary* action necessitated the move to "culture" as the more comprehensive ground of both state and society (31–32). As the web of individual strivings in both the "economic" and "subpolitical" realm of bodily need and the "moral" and "suprapolitical" realm of genuine virtue, "society thus understood is no longer properly called society, nor even civilization, but culture" (33).³⁵ Culture represents the web of individual strivings for the true happiness that is each his or her own, and hence, "as susceptible of being used in the plural," it is not only the modern equivalent of the city but also "the matrix of the state" (32–33). According to the modern view, then, the city in the classical sense is not the highest and most comprehensive society, nor is the political element the highest element of human communities. To the contrary, "the political" is derivative of "culture."

Consequently, Aristotle's view that the political community reflects "an order of rank among the various elements of culture" is seen to be "arbitrary or at best the expression of one culture among many" (34). Yet Strauss asks whether Aristotle's apparently "special case" is not in fact the "normal case": that is, whether "each culture must be understood in the light of what it looks up to," which is "reflected in a particular kind of human being," and especially "the kind of human being that may rule in broad daylight" (34). In this light, the view that "all elements of a culture are of equal rank" itself reflects a more

35 See Strauss (1965), 2; (1947), 285.

fundamental, that is, “cosmological,” commitment to equality: “[what] we may call the egalitarian view of culture, reflects an egalitarian society—a society which derives its character from its looking up to equality (and ultimately to a universe not consisting of essentially different parts), and which therefore looks up to such uncommon men as devote themselves to the common man” (34–5). The ground of such a commitment and the obstacle it presents for a return to Aristotle’s political science, free of presuppositions that impede our willingness to learn from it, become clearer as Strauss proceeds.³⁶

The modern commitment or devotion to equality proves to be the source of the objection that Strauss confronts next, in the third section of the essay: “Aristotle’s alleged anti-democratic prejudice” (35). In addition to tackling this objection in its own right, Strauss clarifies the reasoning that undergirds Aristotle’s opposition to democracy—why this opposition is more than mere prejudice. For Aristotle’s treatment of democracy in the *Politics* presents both principled and prudential arguments for democracy as the “normal form” of the political community. In fact, “the argument for a certain kind of democracy”—one in which “the common people are not too depraved”—even “appears to be conclusive on the political level” (37). Aristotle’s defense of democracy at this level thus makes somewhat puzzling his subsequent turn in the *Politics* to a discussion of “absolute monarchy,” of “that Zeus-like man who has the highest natural title to rule, a much higher title than any multitude” (37). In considering the inner logic of Aristotle’s move, Strauss suggests that “the ultimate reason why Aristotle has reservations against even the best kind of democracy is his certainty that the *demos* is *by nature* opposed to philosophy” (37, my emphasis).³⁷ This reason, and not a mere prejudice against democracy as such, is what informs Aristotle’s preference for aristocracy, or the rule of gentlemen,

36 In an apparent digression (see 34, “But to return to the relation between ‘city’ and ‘culture,’ . . .”), Strauss distinguishes in this context Hegel’s understanding of religion as the “originating core” of culture and Aristotle’s treatment of the divine as both first and fifth in the city (33–34). The full significance of this digression becomes clear only at the end of *The City and Man*, but Strauss here signals certain theological implications of the modern and Aristotelian views, to which he returns in discussing the modern rejection of Aristotle’s understanding of the whole as naturally ordered (see 38–40).

37 See especially Strauss’s citations of the *Politics* in n. 34. He refers also in the subsequent note to Plato’s *Gorgias* (481d3–5) and *Republic* (494a4–7), in which perhaps the classical view of the opposition between philosophy and the *demos*, as well as the interest of the philosophers as a class unto themselves, is clearest. See also Strauss (1953), 143 and (1988), 7–8.

who are or can be “open to philosophy”—who will at any rate “listen to the philosopher” (37).³⁸

In the context of this consideration, Strauss reintroduces the central issue of his Introduction: the modern transformation of philosophy. His return to this question sheds light on the modern objection to Aristotle's view of the priority of the political element. The natural inequality among men—by nature some are rulers and others by nature ruled—provides the justification in Aristotle for political inequality, and it “points in its turn to the inequality which pervades nature as a whole: the whole as an ordered whole consists of beings of different rank” (38). But *modern* democracy—as distinguished from the democracy criticized by Aristotle—“presupposes a fundamental harmony between philosophy and the people, a harmony brought about by universal enlightenment, or by philosophy (science) relieving man's estate through inventions and discoveries recognizable as salutary by all, or by both means” (37–8; see also 35–6). On the basis of this break, one could not only come to believe in “the possibility of the simply rational society”—“a society superior in justice and happiness to the society toward which the classics aspired” (38; 3); one could also, by integrating philosophy into the city, replace the distinction between nature and convention at the heart of Aristotle's political science and the Socratic tradition as a whole with the distinction between nature and history (see 15–16).³⁹

But what could have been the source of the modern confidence in the attainability of the simply rational society—of its hope, that is, for harmony between philosophy and the people and its confidence in the fundamental (cosmological) equality among men on which this hope appears to rest? What, in other words, could have persuaded or impelled the originators of the modern project to reject Aristotle's view of nature as an ordered whole consisting of beings of different ranks and, more immediately, the principle of natural inequality that informs his political science? This question occupies the fourth and penultimate section of the essay, in which the problem of natural inequality makes for a relatively seamless transition from section three. Its discussion is prepared for by an extremely condensed analysis, in the third section, of the “egalitarianism” that, Strauss acknowledges, “meet[s] the issue” of the natural inequality so central to Aristotle's political science, namely the egalitarianism that “starts from morality and its implications” (38). We can do no more than to draw from this analysis key points that bear on the question of common sense so much at stake in Strauss's initial turn to Aristotle's political science.

38 See Strauss (1953), 134–35, 140–43, as well as (1959), 88–90.

39 See Strauss (1953), 34–5.

Strauss sketches the line of reasoning that, prompted in part by the modification of the classical tradition by Christianity, seems to have led modern thinkers to overthrow the Aristotelian view of natural inequality and of a naturally ordered whole. But his analysis begins most simply, if surprisingly, with an account of moral praise and blame as the source of a particular kind of egalitarianism and of the cosmology that would arise as a “postulate” from it. For praise and blame presuppose that our actions—hence our being good or bad—are in our power. But this presupposition itself requires that “prior to the exercise of their wills, or by nature, all men are equal with respect to the possibility of becoming good or bad men, i.e., in what seems to be the highest respect” (38). Because human beings are deeply molded by their upbringing and conditions, however, we then seem compelled to make a man somehow responsible for these same conditions: “he himself must have willed the conditions which as it were compel him to act badly,” such that “human fault,” rather than nature, must be the source of “the apparent inequality among men in respect of the possibility of being good” (38–9; cf. NE 113b6ff.). Strauss then offers a remarkable account of the connection between this moral reasoning and the “postulate” of “creation *ex nihilo*.” For the moral difficulty, should we seek to resolve it, would lead us to postulate the existence of a just God who, in making all men equal in respect of their becoming good or bad, cannot be counteracted or limited by “matter” (39). It would lead us to postulate, that is, the existence of an omnipotent and omniscient god—the “absolutely sovereign God of the Bible” (39).

We note this remarkable turn in Strauss’s argument to foreground two key points of the analysis that follows: first, his presentation of the moral origin of the different “cosmologies” of the classical and Biblical traditions, and, second, his account of the moral basis on which modern thinkers rejected both earlier traditions. In the first case, it is true that in a particular form, the “natural” hierarchy among men accepted by Aristotle is preserved in Christianity in the order of creation. For St. Thomas at least makes the God of the Bible consistent with the classical view that natural or created differences among men justify “government by the superior man over men inferior to him” (39).⁴⁰ But this created order is “an act, not of justice, but of liberality,” and it is still “compatible with the possibility that all men possess by nature equally the capability to comply with the prohibition against murder” (39). We can thereby hold human beings responsible for their faults in transgressing the divine commandments of the sovereign God. At the same time, although a God who is absolutely sovereign must remain fundamentally mysterious to us, our moral

40 See also Strauss (1953), 144–45, 163–64.

reasoning nonetheless suggests that in his concern for each of his creatures and for the common good of the universe, he will act justly, which is to say, in accord with his goodness and wisdom. By contrast, according to Strauss, “equivalent considerations” to those that motivated the postulate of creation *ex nihilo* point the ancient thinkers down a different road. Plato is led “to trace vice to ignorance” and Aristotle to highlight also the need for “equipment” (39–40). Rather than postulating an omnipotent and omniscient Creator, whose intention cannot be counteracted by matter, Plato and Aristotle do not make a man responsible for his conditions but accept our inequality with respect to the possibility of becoming good or bad—and so happy—as a matter of nature and chance. As Strauss will say of Aristotle’s position in bringing it somewhat closer to the modern view, “the nature of man is enslaved in many ways so that only very few, and even these not always, can achieve happiness or the highest freedom of which man is by nature capable, so that the city actually dedicated to human excellence is, to say the least, very rare, and so that chance rather than human reason seems to be responsible for the various laws laid down by men” (41–2).

That Aristotle shares some common ground with the modern view, in fact, makes the contrast between the two regarding egalitarianism all the more stark and so revealing. Strauss suggests that one can better understand the classical position by casting a glance at the egalitarianism that is “most characteristically modern”: the “conventional equality” of the social contract and the related identification, having its source in Rousseau’s thought, of morality with autonomy—with obedience not to any law, natural or divine, outside us, but only to the law within us, the law that one has imposed on oneself.⁴¹ By this account, the core of morality is the good will, which is in reach of all human beings equally, even though the actual “fulfillment of all duties” is impeded by unequal natural abilities. Yet if “the fulfillment of our duties to our fellow men is the one thing needful,” we cannot have a duty to respect the natural inequality that impedes this end. Rather, our very duty is to subjugate the natural both within and outside ourselves to the one thing to which we owe our “dignity,” the moral law (40). This characteristically modern egalitarianism is thus connected in Strauss’s account with the deeply moral aim of the modern project and its concomitant hope for a perfectly rational society, radically egalitarian, in which the “decisive battle against nature” is won—a society in which each subjugates the nature within himself to the moral law he imposes on himself, and in which every obstacle, natural or conventional, to the full development

41 See also Strauss (1947), 288–90.

of individual autonomy is removed.⁴² “If,” Strauss notes, using Aristotelian language, “happiness is indeed unobstructed virtuous activity,”⁴³ and if each human being thus obtains the highest level of development once every obstacle to it is removed, such a society will have no need for coercion (41). It will have achieved a harmony and a perfection unthinkable to the ancients—a coherence of justice and happiness that they assign to the best political order attainable only “in speech.”

In what follows, however, Strauss suggests that such high hopes are connected with a very dark view of our situation as human beings. In particular, he indicates the connection of the moral aim of the modern project with the modern rejection of the “optimism” of Aristotle’s view (41). For, however enslaved human nature may be and however much our happiness seems to depend on chance or fortune (41–42), Aristotle evidently remains confident that “there is a natural harmony between the whole and the human mind” (41). What Strauss or Aristotle means by this harmony—or how it is possible to know what is true happiness for human beings as such, let alone attain it—is in no way straightforward, as the first section of the essay has shown. In the present context, however, we can say at least this much: in contrast to the Biblical tradition, the classical thinkers do not postulate an omnipotent and omniscient God who secures the common good of the universe or the happiness of human beings, but, in contrast to the modern tradition, neither do they “rebel” against the evils with which this universe appears to abound. As Strauss observes regarding the “original sense” of the term “optimism”: “the world is the best possible world; we have no right to assume that the evils with which it abounds, and especially the evils which do not originate in human folly, could have been absent without bringing about still greater evils; man has no right to complain and to rebel” (41). What seems to distinguish the modern tradition from the classical view in particular is just such a “rebellion,” with its accompanying sense of “right” and its “resolve” finally “to liberate man from [his] enslavement by his own sustained effort,” which “finds its telling expression in the demand for the ‘conquest’ of nature” (42).⁴⁴

Strauss suggests that this rebellion represents at its heart skepticism that the mysterious God of the Bible has good will toward us. The omnipotent and

42 See also Strauss (1959), 51–53.

43 *NE* 1153b7–17; see also 1101a14–16 and 1177b19–26.

44 See Burns (2014), n. 20, for a fuller explication of Strauss’s thought on this point. See Strauss (1995a), 323 on Nietzsche’s extrapolation from this original sense of optimism and his treatment of Socrates as the “prototype of the rationalist and therefore of the optimist.”

omniscient God now takes on another, demonic, face. For the modern rebellion does not deny the possibility of creation *ex nihilo* so much as it rejects, in reflecting on the evils of the world, assumptions about God's just intention: "we must reckon with the possibility that the world is the work of an evil demon bent on deceiving us about himself, the world, and ourselves by means of the faculties with which he has supplied us" (43; see also 42). This same skepticism naturally extends to the classical optimism that "the world is the best possible world" and that the whole can in some manner be known—if only, as Strauss indicates briefly, through the "microcosm" that is man, "the only animal which possesses reason or speech, or which strives for seeing or knowing for its own sake, or whose soul is somehow 'all things' "(41; cf. 137–38). This view now appears, too, "as a wishful or good-natured assumption" (43). In the face of a nature, or a God, that is our "enemy," man must acquire the means of his own security and liberation: "Accordingly," says Strauss, repeating and modifying a thought from the Introduction (3), "science ceases to be proud contemplation and becomes the humble and charitable handmaid devoted to the relief of man's estate" (42; see also 1).

Strauss observes that if human beings can trust neither in god nor in our natural faculties at all, then each of us is thrown into a condition of extreme skepticism, such that "I can trust only what is entirely within my control: the concepts which I consciously make and of which I do not claim more than that they are my constructs" (43). Extreme skepticism comes to be coupled with philosophic dogmatism: As Strauss's references to the "evil demon" or *deus deceptor* indicate (42–43), the modern rebellion is connected with the Cartesian rejection of the world of common sense, for we cannot trust our sense perception itself, not to say its grasp of the things of the world as wholes. Hence, human beings can know only the concepts we construct and then test as to their logic or effective power. For this reason, "the synthesis of dogmatism and skepticism eventually takes the form of an infinitely progressive science as a system or agglomeration of confirmed hypotheses which remain exposed to revision *in infinitum*" (43; cf. 20–21).

Most important to Strauss in this context is the radical consequence of this move for philosophy itself. For it entailed a radical break with the "primary or natural understanding of the whole" that led "to the transformation and eventually to the abandonment of the questions which on the basis of the primary understanding reveal themselves as the most important questions" (43). As Strauss has made clear, this primary or natural understanding of the whole—the understanding of the citizen or the world of "common sense" unmodified by science—is somehow preserved, if refined, in the classical tradition. For Aristotle, this primary understanding points further to a naturally ordered

whole, in which, that is, there are beings of different rank and in which there is, finally, a harmony between the whole and the human mind (see again 38 and 41). In rejecting Aristotle's view in the second respect (see 42–43), however, the modern tradition also cut itself off from the realm of “common sense” that is our access to “the most important questions.”

Strauss proceeds to raise difficulties with the modern posture toward nature—that it “both demands and cannot admit natural ends,” for example. But in the course of these criticisms, he notes also a difficulty with Aristotle's assertion regarding the life of human excellence that is by nature the highest end of a human being. On one hand, this end is “universal” in the sense that no human life can be understood or seen to be what it is except in the light of that end. On the other hand, the life of excellence is so rare as to raise the question of whether there is also not a “natural obstacle” to it (44). Strauss's analysis of this difficulty recalls the essential character of the modern response to it, with its “politicization of philosophic thought...or in other words the obsolescence in modern thought of the distinction between nature and convention” (44). But this analysis also leaves us with a question related to the problem of common sense that initiated his turn to Aristotle: Does Aristotle's own claim regarding the life of human excellence that is man's true, and “universal,” end and happiness depend finally on a view of nature that is rightly called a “wishful or good-natured assumption”? Strauss begins to address this question in the brief concluding section of his essay, in which he sets Aristotle's *Politics* fully within the Socratic tradition to which it belongs.

4 Conclusion: Aristotle's *Politics*, Common Sense, and the Socratic Tradition

Only in the final section of the essay is Strauss prepared to correct the earlier suggestion that the “city-state,” or even the *polis* in the strict sense, is the theme of the *Politics*. Rather, “the theme of the *Politics* is the *politeia* (the regime), the ‘form’ of a city” (45). By the regime, Strauss means most obviously what he has called the “political element” and the order it establishes or reflects. But he now describes this order more precisely as the “public or political morality” of the community, which presents itself as authoritative and molds citizens in accord with a particular “form,” of which there are several varieties: democratic, oligarchic, and aristocratic. Strauss insists that “not to see the city in the light of the variety of regimes means not to look at the city as a political man does, *i.e.* as a man concerned with a specific public morality does” (48).

As Strauss shows through a careful analysis of *Politics* 1276b3–11, Aristotle acknowledges the undeniable fact that the human beings of a particular association may be continuous through a change of political regimes—he “was not blind to the continuity of the ‘matter’ as distinguished from the discontinuity of the ‘forms’” (46). Nevertheless, Aristotle also shows, on the basis of an “experience,” that the identity of the city and of the citizen depends “above all” on the regime (see especially 45–48): he points first and foremost to what people, and democrats in particular, “say” at the moment of a change in regime regarding whether it was the city that acted in a particular case or some part that unjustly, or illegitimately, held rule (46–47). Aristotle’s account of the matter brings out the fact that every regime reflects a claim regarding political justice: regarding who should rule in accord with which principle of justice. In then arbitrating these claims, moreover, he shows how this dispute necessarily gives rise to the “guiding question” of the *Politics*, the best regime (47–49; see also 21). In being thus “practical,” Aristotle’s political science remains rooted in the “prescientific” world of the citizen and is guided by the questions that arise when one attends to the opinions of the city: the opinions reflected in the law and in “justice democratically understood, justice oligarchically understood, justice aristocratically understood, and so on” (48).

In this primary sense, then, Aristotle’s political science does not take its bearings from theoretical or scientific presuppositions, which have not examined their own basis or considered their own origins: how they have emerged from, perhaps as an unjustified modification of, the understanding that is first or most authoritatively the understanding of the city. To come to a more adequate understanding of Aristotle’s *Politics*—its theme and guiding question—we must therefore grasp, without presuppositions, this primary understanding of the city; we must look at the political community not as a theoretical man does, but as a political man does. Against the presuppositions of our own time, then, Strauss’ Aristotle points us back to this necessary beginning point: the “prescientific” world of “common sense,” which reveals the “most important questions,” from which science or philosophy arises and to which it must continually return if it is to justify itself against its greatest challenger and understand itself as “science.”

In taking up this question of common sense in Aristotle’s *Politics*, I repeat, I have only scratched the surface of Strauss’s essay on Aristotle, to say nothing of Aristotle’s political science itself. Moreover, as Strauss has underlined, this political science is a development within the tradition of political philosophy that has its origin in Socrates. It therefore must be considered also in the light of Socrates’ own return to common sense—his inquiry into the opinions of

the city—that distinguished his quest for wisdom. Among the richest veins to mine in *The City and Man* is the question of this return, at the heart of which is Socrates' effort to establish the limits of the city, and so of the political life as the most serious alternative to the philosophic life when it comes to human happiness or what is best for a human being (see again 29; also 138). According to Strauss's concluding remark in his presentation of Aristotle, the philosophic or contemplative life is the life from which Aristotle "abstracts" in basing his thematic discussion of the best regime "on the principle that the highest end of man, happiness, is the same for the individual and the city" (49). On one hand, Aristotle would thereby appear to have demonstrated the naturalness of the city and so to have established its "dignity" (45; cf. 40). On the other hand, the city is capable only of an "analogue" of the best life.⁴⁵ To grasp that life in its fullness, we must confront the puzzle or problem of Socrates, "who spent his life in the unending ascent to the idea of the good and in awakening others to that ascent" (29). In turning next to Plato's *Republic*, Strauss points readers in the direction of Socrates: toward Socrates' radical investigation of the city as well as toward the understanding of the city that he presupposed and that is most fully articulated in the pages of Thucydides.⁴⁶ Although Aristotle's political science stood for centuries without being thrown into radical doubt, it now must be seen in the full light of its origins if it is to aid us in our current predicament. In clearing the way to a recovery of the prescientific world of "common sense" presupposed by classical political philosophy, Strauss thus invites readers concerned with the crisis of our time, and with the most important questions simply, to turn "with passionate interest, with unqualified willingness to learn, toward the political thought of classical antiquity."

45 Strauss cites *Politics* 1323b40–25b32, and especially 1324a19–23. But he also cites, as an alternative to his reading, [Thomas'] *Commentary on the Politics* vii, lectio 2, in which Peter of Auvergne, who completed the *Commentary*, contends that the best man stands to the best city as part to whole and that the happiness of the best city is greater and more perfect, and so better and more divine, than that of the best man since the best city too is capable of contemplation and so of the highest happiness. See especially 1061–65 and 1081–85. Cf. Strauss (2013), 84–5, 99.

46 This city as we find it in the pages of Thucydides, the "holy city," or more precisely, the intention that thereby animates the "philosophic concept of the city as exhibited by classical political philosophy" is perhaps the neglected aspect of classical political philosophy of which Strauss speaks in his Preface (see again 240–41). But cf. Benardete (1978), 1, and Zuckert and Zuckert (2013), 145–47.

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